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Private Tutor to the Duke's Daughter

Creating a New Legend with the Unbeatable Lady of the Sword

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Prologue

"Huh. You look like a wimp, but I guess you're not completely hopeless," the girl beside me gibed as dust filled the air of the Royal Academy's practical testing ground. She was roughly my height and slender, with short scarlet hair and intimidatingly refined features. Her red and white clothes were obviously of high quality, and her sword, which she was holding at the ready, was probably a masterpiece. The most striking thing about her was her eyes, which blazed with a curiosity about me that she could not quite suppress.

Is this really the time or the place? I wanted to ask. *We're in the middle of a test that could determine the rest of our lives.*

"Hello to you too," I settled on responding. "Oh, but perhaps I should be more formal, Your Highness, Lady Lydia Leinster?"

"If you want a fight, I'll give you one," she snapped back. An instant later, there was cold metal against the nape of my neck; her sword had moved too fast for my eyes to follow. Had she been serious, my head would have already rolled.

Her Highness means me no harm. I'm sure this is just a game to her. Still, I suppose she's the type to swing first and ask questions later. How frightening...

I raised my hands slightly in surrender. "Just a little joke on my part."

"That wasn't funny. How about I slice you up?" Her words were harsh, but she seemed to be enjoying herself even more as she withdrew her sword—like a beast of prey that had found a new toy.

I'm not your opponent, remember?

The practical test normally consisted of a one-on-one bout against a teacher or fellow examinee, but mine was a two-against-one. That alone was an incredible exception, but I also had this dangerous young woman for a partner, and our opponent was...

I heaved a sigh, and the girl standing beside me immediately narrowed her eyes. "You just made fun of me, didn't you?" she asked.

"Perish the thought. Now, don't you think we should do something about *him* first?” I asked, pointing to the section of the arena still shrouded in dust. There was a massive rent in the ground, and part of the wall that encircled the testing site had collapsed. It was an unusual amount of damage considering that the structure was protected by a multilayered defensive barrier.

What’s even more unusual is that she sliced through it like butter...

“Well, all right.” There was a tinge of dissatisfaction in her voice, but she rested her sword on her shoulder nonetheless. “I’ll grant you a temporary truce. Be grateful for my kindness.”

“Thank you. I can hardly contain my tears of joy at your generous consideration.”

“I knew it. You *are* making fun of—”

Her outrage was cut short by a thunderous roar as rubble scattered in all directions. At its source, a white-robed man holding a staff began to levitate into the air. His long ears and unearthly good looks marked him as an elf. His expression was stiff and—were my eyes playing tricks on me?—he looked as though he were about to cry.

Yes, I know just how you feel. Who would expect to come up against a terror like her during the entrance exams? I mean, slicing through advanced spells and magical barriers like— Whoa there.

I retreated half a step, evading a slash aimed at my head, although a few hairs from my bangs still paid the ultimate price. The sudden swipe was quickly followed by a thrust as my attacker took out her displeasure on me like a child throwing a tantrum.

“You were *definitely* insulting me in your head that time!” she fumed. “You can’t talk your way out of this one!”

“C-Calm down! I was just thinking how charming you are!”

She paused for a moment. “Me? Charming? If you’re going to spout nonsense—”

“I mean it. Although you’d be more my type if you grew out your hair to...oh, long enough to cover your back.”

She paused again, except this time... “You know, I think I’ll slice you up after all.”

“I meant that as a compliment! Besides, I’d really rather stay in one piece; I want to get into the academy, for one thing.”

“Then let’s get this over with! We can have a nice, long talk after,” she said. “Oh, and just call me Lydia. If you add ‘Lady’ or ‘Your Highness’ to that, they’ll be the last words you ever say. What’s your name?”

"My name is..."

*

That dream takes me back. Has it already been four years?

I was lying on a soft pillow as a warm hand gently stroked my head. It was a wonderful feeling. I had been busy with this and that lately, and it seemed that I had been more tired than I realized. After slowly opening my eyes, I recognized the ceiling and the feel of the sofa.

Now, what happened today?

My favorite willful young noblewoman had summoned me to the Leinster house and then made impossible demands of me when I arrived, as usual. To think I'd assumed the university graduation ceremony would be the end of my suffering...

"Not bad. Try this on next."

"It looks lovely on you, dear brother!"

"Yes, it really suits you, Mr. Allen! I approve of that angle too!"

The voices still rang in my ears.

I'll never dress up like a butler again. Do you hear me? Never! I've worn enough of those uniforms for one lifetime.

Once my duties as a dress-up doll were behind me, I had lain down on the sofa in her room for a brief rest and...

A young woman with gorgeous, long scarlet hair leaned over from beside me and gazed down at me. She was dressed in casual clothes rather than one of her usual sword-fighting outfits and was holding a mug with a picture of a little red bird on it. I was taken aback in spite of myself. Her childishness was gone, replaced with a more mature beauty, but the look of sincere enjoyment in her eyes was the same as it had been on that day.

"Oh. You're awake," she said. "I was looking forward to kicking you out if you were still lying there by nightfall. So inconsiderate of you to spoil my fun."

"I had a dream. Do you remember when we first met and..." I stopped short as I suddenly comprehended what she had just said. "Kicking me out wouldn't be very nice. Couldn't you show me a little kindness? I *did* do everything you asked."

"No, I don't remember. And you've been duty bound to do what I ask since the moment you were born. Besides which, I'm the kindest person there is, no matter the time or place, remember?"

"I'd like you to be even nicer to me, if possible."

"Oh? How, specifically?"

The brilliant young woman who had just deposited her mug on the table was Lydia, the albatross around my neck. She was the eldest daughter of the Ducal House of Leinster, one of the Four Great Dukedoms and the guardians of the south, which made her one of the very few people in the kingdom to be styled "Her Highness." The perhaps unusual title—a prerogative of the ducal houses—had its roots in historical circumstances, and there was even speculation that the houses remained in the royal line of succession.

Lydia's ancestry alone was enough to make her impressive, but at a mere seventeen years of age, she was also "the Lady of the Sword," one of the foremost swordswomen in the kingdom; a sorceress who had mastered the supreme fire spell Firebird; a genius who had skipped ahead years at both the Royal Academy and Royal University and still graduated at the top of her classes; and a dazzling beauty, at least until she opened her mouth. In short, she was an utterly flawless young noblewoman...with the exception of her personality.

Her slender fingers continued to play with my hair, tickling me.

"Dare I ask—will you actually consider my suggestions?" I said.

"I'm feeling particularly generous, so I'll let you choose between getting sliced up and incinerated."

"...I was a fool to have any hope. What time is it?" I tried to sit up, but her petite right hand pinned down one of my shoulders.

Oh dear. I have a bad feeling about this.

"Don't get up yet. Dinner will be ready soon."

"But I was planning to go home. I have to prepare for tomorrow."

"Stay."

"Lydia...are you still a little angry, by any chance?"

She let my question hang in the air for a moment before answering. "Excuse me? Of course not. You're too self-conscious." Despite her words, I could sense how much she was sulking. It seemed that even keeping her company for a whole day hadn't been enough to cure her displeasure.

I stretched out a hand and touched her silky hair. "Sorry. I really would have loved to be able to attend your court sorceress investiture tomorrow."

"I already told you, it doesn't bother me. I'm not the least bit bothered that you'll be attending the Royal Academy entrance ceremony at Duke Howard's invitation, while *I* can't go to see my sister there." After a brief pause, she added, "And I'm really, *really* not bothered that you linked your mana with another girl."

There was nothing I could say to that. It sounded as though Lydia's displeasure ran deep, and it was hard to argue with her when its roots were so deeply embedded in my shortcomings. I had aspired to become a court sorcerer alongside her but ended up failing the exam. And then, three months ago, I had been granted my current post as private tutor to Tina, the second daughter of the House of Howard, one of the Four Great Dukedoms, and to Ellie, the heir to the Walker family, one of the Howards' chief supporters. Originally, my job was only supposed to last until the girls earned their admissions to the Royal Academy, but it was still ongoing for a variety of reasons.

"Linking mana" was an unusual ability of mine. I had only shared its existence with those I was extremely close to, and I had only actually used it with the currently sulky Lady of the Sword, my younger sister, and my student Tina, with whom I had first linked my mana not long before. I had firmly resolved to keep my link with Tina a secret...but Lydia had easily uncovered it not three days after our reunion. She was too sharp for me.

I never expected to find myself getting a simulated experience of the afterlife without even having to die.

Lydia was apparently less than enthusiastic about my continuing as a private tutor. *"Haven't you done enough?"* she had asked me. I had personally been of the same opinion, but... I recalled the events in the Howards' garden.

I'll take that secret to the grave. I'd quite like to stay alive, for one thing.

"It's also a shame that I won't get to see you all dressed up in the palace," I said as I sat up—successfully this time—and pacified the sulky noblewoman.

"I'll go in my normal clothes tomorrow," she told me after a pause. "It's not like there's a dress code. Anyway, just thinking about being ogled by that stupid prince and having to breathe the same air as him makes me sick to my stomach!"

"Not that I don't understand. Still, what a waste of beauty."

"Do you mean me or the dress?"

"The dress, of course."

"Die," she chirped with a smile, attempting to scythe me with the edge of her hand. I managed to stop the attack mere moments before being bisected.

"L-Lydia! I'm telling you, that's dangerous!"

"You're a failure as a servant! As punishment..." She reached out to me with both arms and made a small grunt.

"No," I said plainly, but she responded with a more emphatic grunt and then stared at me in silence for what felt like an age. "Oh, fine. You're hopeless."

I moved to hug her, only to be interrupted by a knock at the door. "Lady Lydia, Mr. Allen." I recognized the maid's voice; it must have been dinnertime.

"What rotten timing..." Lydia tutted.

"I wonder where I went wrong raising you..."

"As far as I'm concerned, you didn't raise me. If anything, *I* raised *you*," Lydia shot back, sounding as happy as she had just been sullen. I couldn't help but wonder where the sulking girl from just a moment ago had disappeared to.

So it was half an act... I can never be too careful with her.

"Come on. We're going." Lydia stood up and started pulling on my right hand with both of hers. "Stay here tonight and come right back here after the entrance ceremony tomorrow!"

"That's not really..." I was about to object, but then I realized it would be safer to provide an explanation. "I promised to meet my sister for lunch."

"Then meet me after that. I've already sent a messenger to the Howards. You need to be in formal wear tomorrow, remember?

You'll have to get dressed here. You're making me go to the royal sorcerer investiture alone, so make at least *some* concessions."

Are these really concessions? It feels more like I'm being extorted... I thought, but the noblewoman was looking at me with uncharacteristic unease. *That's just not fair; how am I supposed to say no to that face?*

"All right," I conceded. "I'll take advantage of your generous offer."

She blinked at me, clearly taken aback. "Y-You should have said that in the first place, dummy."

Putting a drunk and high-spirited Lydia to bed that night was a challenge. As for where I slept...I invoke my right to remain silent.

"Tee hee hee. Only one 'yes,' remember?"

I shudder to think what will happen when she wakes up... How am I going to slip out of here in the morning?

Chapter 1

The Royal Academy—it was the shortest route to the Royal University, the finest educational institution in the kingdom, making it a truly elite gateway to success. Those who managed to graduate near the top of their class gained a path to the core of the government and massively increased chances of earning renown. Even the ranks of the court sorcerers, fewer than twenty of whom were appointed each year, were dominated by graduates.

Of course, one couldn't put too much stock in that—some people could graduate second in their class from both schools and still not amount to much. I doubted that any of my classmates were working as private tutors. Not that I was complaining.

Still, I have to ask: Why? Why must I...

I confronted my reflection in the massive full-length mirror. Just the day before, I'd sworn up and down never to dress like this again. Why was she so fixated on making me?

Beside me, a slender, chestnut-haired woman—the Leinsters' head maid Anna—hummed as she made her final inspection. "Is anything the matter, Mr. Allen?" she asked with a smile.

"Oh, I was just musing on the incomprehensibility of life," I answered. "By the way, what's that video orb for?"

"I simply must show Lady Lydia!"

I considered what she had just said for a moment before replying. "I see." *After all those pictures she took, she still wants more.*

Lydia had given me a hard time this morning as well. She'd known that she had to leave ahead of me for the royal palace, but she'd still lingered at the door, whining about wanting to attend the entrance ceremony too. She was normally cool, collected, and a sight to behold—an utterly flawless young noblewoman, apart from her personality. But when I was involved, she became much too willful.

I'd lost a lot in the negotiation. Did she not realize how much we would stand out walking through the royal capital together?

Maybe she really should have worn that dress. What would it mean for the eldest daughter of one of the Four Great Dukedoms to attend the prestigious court sorcerer investiture in her everyday clothes, and armed with a sword, at that? There had been an uneasy look in the eyes of Duke Leinster, who had come from the south to attend.

"Now for the grand unveiling. The young ladies must be growing tired of waiting. Oh, I can hardly wait!" Anna crooned as she skipped out of the room.

I took another look in the mirror and sighed. A moment later, a lovely young girl about as tall as Tina entered the room. She was wearing a red dress and had an ornament in her similarly red hair, which was slightly curly and longer than Lydia's had been when we first met. Still, there was a strong resemblance.

"Excuse me, dear brother. I'm sorry to keep you—"

She froze, her eyes wide. It wasn't a very reassuring reaction.

"Lynne," I said after a pause, "you could at least laugh."

"N-Never! Y-You look fabulous."

The girl who so kindly soothed my wounded feelings was Lynne Leinster, second daughter of the Ducal House of Leinster and Lydia's younger sister. This meant she was styled "Her Highness" as well, and was therefore not someone that a commoner such as I could ordinarily address so casually. The title infuriated her just as much as it did her sister, however, so I addressed her by name to avoid provoking her.

Lynne had learned both magic and swordsmanship from her older sister. Had I not taken my current job as Tina and Ellie's private tutor, I might have contributed to her education as well. That was one of the reasons why I couldn't stand up to her or Lydia at the moment.

Following after Lynne were my adorable students: a girl in a soft azure dress whose hair was decorated with an ornament and a snow-white ribbon, and a girl wearing the uniform of the Royal Academy.

"W-Wait for us. We don't know our way around this house, and —"

"L-Lady Tina, you mustn't run. Your hair will get—"

Both girls froze the instant they laid eyes on me, exactly as Lynne had.

The girl in the dress was Her Highness, Lady Tina Howard, the second daughter of the Ducal House of Howard, one of the Four

Great Dukedoms and the guardians of the north. She housed what seemed to be the great spell Frigid Crane—one of the major reasons I was staying on as her tutor. Her cheeks were slightly flushed, so she must have been in quite a hurry.

The girl in uniform was Ellie Walker, the heir to the Walker family, who had supported the Howards for generations. She was also Tina's personal maid and childhood friend. The Royal Academy uniform was as stylish as I remembered; other schools occasionally dressed their students in blazers these days, but as far as I was aware, only the Royal Academy had berets.

They're reacting the same way as Lynne. That's disheartening.

"Tina, Ellie. This doesn't suit me, does it?" I asked. "I think I'll sit out the entrance ceremony after all. Attending in Duke Walter's place was always too much for me. Members of both the Howard and Leinster households will surely record everything too, so—"

"No!" three voices shouted in perfect unison. I was taken aback as the girls closed in on me.

"Don't worry, dear brother!" Lynne reassured me. "You look absolutely, positively wonderful!"

"That's right, sir!" Tina chimed in. "I wish I could have picked out your clothes myself."

"Allen, sir, um... You look very, um, handshome..." Ellie added hesitantly.

"Lynne, Tina, Ellie..."

All this solicitude from girls even younger than my sister was making me teary-eyed. If only Lydia had even half—even a quarter—of this consideration!

A burst of laughter interrupted my thoughts. "That look suits you. It's no wonder Lydia threw a tantrum. Perhaps I should have you wear something *I* picked out next time."

"Please don't tease me," I requested after a moment of silence.

"Oh, but I'm only speaking the truth," came the reply. "This has its charms. Well done, Anna."

"Your praise is more than I deserve, mistress."

The woman attended by Anna was Duke Leinster's wife and Lydia's mother, Duchess Lisa Leinster. She assisted her husband in governing the duchy—they were really corulers—and her days were ordinarily extremely busy. That said, Lydia's appointment as a court sorcerer and Lynne's admittance to the Royal Academy second in her class were extraordinary occasions. The duke and duchess had arrived from the south that morning, anxious to celebrate their daughters' success. Lisa had apparently taken responsibility for her younger daughter and was leaving Lydia to her husband, it being customary for the Four Great Dukes and Eight Great Marquesses to attend the investiture of new court sorcerers and knights of the royal guard.

The duchess appeared to be in her late twenties thanks to her unchanging beauty and figure. Her gorgeous, long scarlet hair closely resembled Lydia's, and she was just a little shorter than me; I seemed to recall her rejoicing when I had overtaken her. In a group with Lydia and Lynne, Lisa appeared more like their older sister than their parent, but the way she eyed them was unmistakably maternal. Coupled with her magnificent scarlet dress, she looked every inch the Duchess Leinster.

I suppose it can't hurt to ask...

"Duchess Lisa," I began.

"Hm? Allen?" she replied. "I couldn't quite hear you; I must be showing my age. Would you repeat that?"

After a long pause, I tried again. "Lisa, I understand that the Royal Academy entrance ceremony is important, but I'd only be taking up space, so..."

"No. Do this properly. You're practically my son, and a mother has a duty to make her sons look their best. You were thinking that your sorcerer's robes would be good enough, weren't you?"

There was nothing I could say to that.

"Am I correct?" she continued. "Lydia really is hopeless when it comes to these things. She needs to educate you properly. Just because she hasn't seen you in three months and wants to fawn on you so much that—"

"*Ahem.* My lady," Anna interrupted.

"Oh, was that technically a secret?" Lisa giggled and then resumed speaking to me. "She gets worked up so easily when it comes to you, you know? Why, earlier this morning I teased her a little about leaving for the capital ahead of you, and she shot a Firebird at me! I must have done something wrong during her upbringing."

"I've been thinking the same thing myself," I confessed.

Yes, I was currently dressed in formal wear of the very highest quality—clothing that I would normally never wear or even have the opportunity to. My hair had also been fixed in place with styling cream. To be frank, I thought I looked like a faux butler.

This was far from my first time being forced into clothes like these since my return to the royal capital, and this outfit was better put together than the one from the day before, but it still made me uncomfortable. That was partly because I had seen the genuine article at the Howard mansion in the form of Mr. Walker.

Really, how did I end up in this predicament...?

Maybe it was because I didn't treasure my parents enough; I still hadn't written to them about my present situation. Or was it my punishment for not returning home with my sister that spring?

"Now, let's be on our way," Lisa said. It was hard not to notice how closely her voice resembled the albatross's. "But first—Allen."

"Yes?" I responded after a tense pause.

"What do you do when you see ladies, of any age, all dressed up?"

I allowed the question to sit for a moment before answering. "I'll tell them later."

"That won't do. I take it the three of you agree?"

"We want you to tell us!" three voices affirmed.

"Living up to expectations is a boy's duty. Do your best."

"All right..." I conceded after another silence. I was no match for Lisa. She had treated me kindly ever since our first meeting, but she was also easily more demanding than even Lydia. There had never been a way out of this. At the same time, complimenting the four of them while Anna was cheerfully standing by with a video orb was essentially suicide; there was no question that the albatross would draw her sword and unleash a Firebird at me when she saw it. I wanted to cry.

Well, needs must.

"I'll tell you in the carriage," I proposed. "In exchange, I'll live up to my attire and act as your butler until the end of the entrance ceremony."

"Oh, will you now? Then you must ride in my carriage on the way there," Lisa declared.

"N-No!" Tina objected. "I won't give up my tutor, n-not even to you, Duchess Lisa!"

"I-I think that Allen's own wishes ought to take priority! A-Allen, sir..." Ellie pleaded.

"D-Dear mother! Th-That wouldn't be fair!" Lynne stammered. "D-Dear brother..."

"Listen to that, Allen. You're in high demand. Now, decide who you're going to ride with." Lisa winked and smiled at me. So she'd anticipated all of this... I was torn between being impressed by her deftness and ashamed of my own inexperience.

I closed my eyes and announced, "I'll serve as a butler to the three of you. I trust you have no objections, my ladies?"

*

"Allow me to reiterate, dear brother: that outfit suits you to a T."

Lynne smiled from her seat across from me in the luxurious carriage. I knew that she must be used to seeing clothes like these, but her solicitude meant a lot to me nonetheless. She was a nice, polite young woman—one would never guess she was Lydia's sister.

Tina, Ellie, what are you scowling like that for? Come on. Smile.

The girls had squabbled over who would sit next to me, but one word from Lisa had put an end to that. The three of them were now sitting together, while I sat in front of them.

Lisa and Anna were riding in a separate carriage. I was sure that they were having a confidential discussion of some sort—they would never have given up an opportunity to tease or record me otherwise. I supposed that I was lucky the Howards' head maid, Mrs. Walker, had gone on ahead of us, at least.

I really must be careful. I'd rather avoid getting caught up in *anything serious.*

"Thank you very much," I replied. "You're looking particularly radiant yourself, Lady Lynne. And please, my ladies, call me 'Allen.' I am your humble butler, after all."

Lynne gasped at my words, while Tina looked annoyed.

"I, um... I-I agree with Lady Lynne, Allen, sir!" Ellie chimed in.

"You needn't call me 'sir' either, Miss Ellie. Ah, I see that you wear your uniform magnificently. But what's this? It appears that the ribbon at your collar is a little crooked. If you would allow me... There, that's better."

"Y-Yessir! Th-Thank you bery mush..."

Both Lynne and Ellie were now fidgeting in their seats, their faces flushed. Tina was sandwiched between them, looking indignant. "You seem awfully pleased to get compliments from Lynne and Ellie, si—*Allen,*" she remarked a moment later.

"Yes, I am pleased. I don't receive many compliments," I replied.

"Would you be pleased if *I* complimented you?"

"Of course."

"I-I see." Tina fell silent for a moment. "Um, it looks quite becoming on—"

"Allen," Lynne interrupted, "please tell us what we should be careful of at the Royal Academy."

Tina, who was sitting to Lynne's right, was dumbfounded. She slowly turned to face Lynne and smiled, her eyes widened in an angry glare. The two girls had apparently been at each other's throats since they met during the entrance exams, and asking either one of them to explain why only invited their displeasure. I had hoped that Ellie would intervene, but she kept silent and looked troubled.

Honestly, what happened between these two? I ought to ask the headmaster; he must have had something to do with it.

"I doubt you have anything to worry about, my ladies...but if pressed to answer, I would caution you against pride," I said.

"Pride?"

"Yes. You are talented, my ladies. I'm sure that your peers will aspire to equal you."

All three girls were unbelievably gifted. Tina had taken first place in the entrance exams and would be delivering an address at the entrance ceremony as the representative of the incoming class.

She was in competition with the albatross for the highest ever score on the written test; I had gone over her answers with her and hadn't been able to find any mistakes. As for her magical ability, she had managed to master the supreme ice spell Blizzard Wolf, albeit imperfectly. Whichever other applicants or teachers had faced her in the practical must have had a difficult time. One would never guess that she had been incapable of spellcasting until recently.

Lynne had taken second place, but if not for Tina, she would have been at the head of her class by a wide margin. As far as I could see, the two girls were practically neck and neck. Lynne had been trained by an enthusiastic Lydia, and it was safe to say that her growth surpassed my expectations. She might have even been more than a match for me in terms of pure swordsmanship. She had also learned the supreme fire spell Firebird, although its power paled in comparison to her older sister's.

Ellie had already placed highly, but she could have aimed even higher if given more time. While she had lagged behind the other two on the written test, she was capable of casting a far broader range of spells. Her spellcasting style was similar to my own, which made her easier to teach.

"People with power tend to become overconfident, to believe that they're more impressive than other people," I explained as I surveyed the trio. "There's nothing inherently wrong with that idea—confidence is necessary. However..."

"It also often leads to an inflated sense of superiority," Lynne ventured after a brief pause.

"Exactly. And, speaking personally, I hope that talented people such as yourselves will remember to treat others with kindness and warmth. Please, my ladies, use your power when you protect yourselves, those you care about, and your beliefs. I have no doubt that you will; I know you are sensible young women of firm character. Thank you for your excellent question, Lady Lynne."

I reached out and gently rubbed her head. She presumably took issue with her curly hair as she seemed to be doing her best to emulate Lydia's hairstyle, but I personally thought it was fine just the way it was.

A happy smile spread across the red-haired girl's face...when a blast of cold struck us. "I see that you think quite highly of Lynne, Allen," Tina remarked icily.

"Oh, are you jealous?" Lynne shot back. "You seem awfully insecure for the head of the class."

"I'm nothing of the kind, but if you'd like to fight, I'll oblige you anytime."

"I'd love to take you up on that offer...but I'll refrain. I, for one, certainly wouldn't want Allen to take a dislike to me. I suppose you don't care either way, though, do you?"

"Wh-What?! O-Of... Of course I care!" Tina stammered. "Do you have any idea how much he means to me?!"

"Lady Tina." I gave her a pat on the head and the chill vanished.

"I'm sorry..." she apologized, sounding dejected.

"It's all right. You too, Lady Lynne. Please don't take after Lady Lydia. I sincerely mean that."

"My apologies. I got a bit too carried away," Lynne conceded.

"And you, Miss Ellie. I know that you excel at mana control, but please refrain from deploying so many spells in such a confined space."

"Y-Yessir!" she replied. "I-I'm so sorry."

Tina and Lynne were capable of casting supreme spells, but their lax control meant they were unable to make the most of them. That was only natural, considering their age; it was something for them to refine in the future. But Ellie was different. Of the three, she was the most suited to actual combat. She was incapable of casting advanced spells, let alone supreme ones, but she significantly outstripped the other two girls in her technical mastery of elementary and intermediate magic. And how silent her spells were! It was genuinely shocking. In that respect, she was possibly on par with a court sorcerer. I could hardly wait to see what heights she would go on to reach. I hoped that she would someday become one of the kingdom's best-known sorceresses.

Setting aside the future, I decided to comfort the maid, who was becoming teary-eyed in the present. She gave a start as I gently brushed her cheek. "Don't cry. You'll spoil your charming looks," I said. "I'm not upset."

"Huh? Oh, um... Ch-Charming..." Ellie stammered.

"Yes, Miss Ellie. Your smile is positively angelic."

She gasped. "Th-Thank you very much..."

Oh, I feel coldness and *heat now...* Handling girls was evidently still a challenge for me, despite my prior experience with Lydia and my sister.

“That goes for you two as well, Lady Tina, Lady Lynne,” I said. Both girls’ eyes widened in response, and all three began to twist in their seats. “Now, we’ll be arriving soon. Please get yourselves ready.”

We’re finally here—the Royal Academy!

*

The window afforded me a view of the parking area, which was crowded with numerous carriages and a smaller number of cars—a clear demonstration that carriages were still the mainstream. The number of people who, like Lisa, avoided using cars was probably a factor. Automobile technology was still in flux, and cars were harder to maintain than horses until one got used to their upkeep.

That said, the duchess was no technophobe; she just loved animals. The Leinsters had even converted part of their duchy into a nature preserve. From what I remembered, they had given me a tour of it when I had been taken—practically abducted—to their estates. I had even heard that it was home to species found nowhere else. The Four Great Dukedoms employed their wealth on a dizzying scale.

Before us stood the massive gates of the Royal Academy, their gleaming black latticework inscribed with myriad sigils. Dwarves had apparently wrought them two centuries prior. Their imposing presence was somewhat softened by the vines that twined through them, stretching from the Great Tree at the center of the academy. The Great Tree also formed the core of a tactical barrier in times of crisis, but that was confidential information.

Now, how does this go? I believe students and guardians use separate entrances; something about respecting student autonomy.

I opened the door of the carriage and stepped out. The sky was overcast and threatened rain, although I hoped it would hold off, given that the entrance ceremony was outdoors.

“May I offer you a hand, my ladies?” I said, reaching into the carriage with a smile. All three girls froze at the sight of me.

Uh... Have I done something wrong?

After a moment, Lynne cleared her throat. “Dear bro—*ahem*—Allen, please don’t startle us like that.”

“Th-That’s right, si—Allen!” Tina added. “You look so handsome today that you might give us heart attacks!”

"Oh? Are you suggesting that he isn't handsome all the time, Miss First Place?" Lynne gibed.

"What?!" Tina seemed taken aback, but she then calmed herself and crowed, "Humph. Act tough all you want; you're obviously jealous of all the time Ellie and I spent with him. Well, too bad for you—he's *our* teacher."

"Shall we settle this now?"

"I-I'd love to!"

"Lady Lynne, Lady Tina," I interjected as a gentle breeze enveloped the pair of startled young noblewomen, lifting them into the air and out of the carriage. They landed softly on the ground, dumbfounded, and then both let out small squeaks as I gave them each a flick on the forehead. "The kingdom's best and brightest are gathered here, and the two of you are the most brilliant of them all. You're going to be role models for all of your classmates, and you must act the part. Besides which"—I patted their disheveled hair back into place—"too much playing around will disarrange your hair and clothes, and we can't have that."

"All right. I'm terribly sorry," Lynne conceded after a moment of sullen silence. "But we were *not* 'playing around.'"

"I'm sorry too." Tina followed suit. "And much as I hate to agree with her, she's right—we weren't."

"Weren't you?" I asked. "You look like the best of friends to me."

"We are *not* friends!" Lynne and Tina shouted in perfect unison.

I knew they would get along.

I reached into the carriage again. "Miss Ellie," I said, "please pardon the delay."

"Y-Yessir!"

As I took her little hand, I noticed she was rigid with nervousness. *Oh, déjà vu. I feel like I've seen this many times before.*

"Eek!"

True to form, Ellie's feet stumbled over the step down from the carriage, and she almost fell.

"Whoa there," I said, catching her in my arms. "Are you hurt, miss?"

It certainly would be a disaster if she injured herself on her big day.

Snug in my arms, Ellie blushed adorably. I squeezed her in a quick hug, taking care not to crease her uniform.

"A-Allen, shir!" Ellie stammered, tripping over her words in embarrassment.

“Dear brother!”

“Sir!”

“Yes?” I asked Lynne and Tina.

“Dear brother, if you, of all people, are going to behave like that,” Lynne said, “you shouldn’t leave me out. I’m always willing.”

“That’s right!” Tina added. “Stop this instant and... Wait, what do you think you’re doing, slipping in a request like that?!”

“Huh?” Lynne sounded confused.

“You know what I mean!” Tina shouted before lowering her voice into a mutter. “I knew we should have settled things during the exam...”

“That can wait. Dear brother, it must be my turn next. Ellie, trade places with me.”

“N-No thank you,” Ellie said after an embarrassed silence.

“If you agree to trade places with me, I’ll lend you the very finest video orbs of Allen from my dear sister’s private collection. Don’t you want to see every side of him there is to see?”

Ellie’s eyes widened. She considered the proposition for a moment and then said, “All right.”

Did I just hear something ominous? What “collection”? And did she say it belongs to Lydia?

Ellie squirmed in my arms, so I released her, albeit reluctantly. I hoped that my brief comforting had helped her get over her nerves.

All of a sudden, there came a laugh from behind me that sounded very much like the albatross. “You’re free to dote on them, Allen, but I won’t keep any secrets.” Sure enough, there stood Lisa, along with a positively beaming Anna, who was busy recording.

“Have a heart,” I said. “The play biting has been intense lately.”

Lisa chuckled. “I see nothing’s changed. I suggest you accompany me if you’d like to avoid any more.”

Essentially, she was ordering me to be her escort during the ceremony. She had probably taken a separate carriage out of concern for the trio of nervous girls—secret discussions notwithstanding—so I at least owed her that much.

Still, the ceremony is going to be packed with wall-to-wall nobles. Not exactly thrilling.

“Lynne, Tina, Ellie.” Lisa called the girls one by one.

“Y-Yes?” three voices answered.

“This is where we part ways,” she told them. “I’ll be borrowing

Allen until the ceremony is over."

"Dear mother," Lynne ventured after a pause, "you can't simply decide these things on your own. We were here first."

"It's too late. Blame your slow decision-making."

"Duchess Lisa," Tina said, "please refrain from trying any funny business with Mr. Allen."

Lisa giggled. "I see you've learned to stand up for yourself. You used to be far too docile; I like you much better now. I'll be looking forward to your speech. Good luck."

"Th-Thank you."

"Uh, um, well..." Ellie stammered.

"Look after the two of them, won't you?" Lisa asked the maid.

"Y-Yes'm!"

"Well then, take care."

"We will!" all three girls answered.

"Allen," Lisa called me.

"Until we meet again, my ladies," I said.

"All right," Lynne and Ellie answered cheerfully. Tina, however, remained silent.

Well now.

I knelt down and rubbed Tina's head. Her eyes widened.

"You look like a little snow fairy today, Lady Tina. Don't worry. Just put your honest feelings into your speech and everything will be fine. And if you're ever nervous..." I touched her snow-white ribbon, and her eyes filled with newfound relief and understanding. I hadn't cast any spells; it was just a good luck charm. "Just remember your final exam at the mansion. And please don't forget—I'll be right there with you," I said with a smile.

"S-Sir!" she stammered. "I... I...!"

"That's enough of that, Miss First Place," Lynne interrupted. "Have you no shame? Everyone can see you."

"I bet you're jealous," Tina shot back after a beat.

Lynne looked incensed. "L-Listen here—"

"N-No fighting, both of you!" Ellie called out. The other two subsided into silence.

Oh, she got them under control. I feel like I'm getting a hazy idea of the dynamics between the three of them. I hope they build a solid relationship—it's important to have friends and rivals your own age.

"Well then," I said, "please take care, my ladies."

"We will." This time, all three girls answered cheerfully before setting off toward the school gate. I prayed that Tina's speech went well and that the new lives the girls were about to embark on as students would be fruitful ones.

"Now, Allen, we should get going as well," Lisa said. "You can tell me all about your time in the north as we walk."

"It was just as I wrote in my letters. I was entirely truthful."

"Yes, I'm sure you were. Nevertheless..." Lisa flashed me an impish grin.

I've seen the albatross smile like that all too often. I don't think it's ever boded well for me.

"I'm curious about what you saw inside Tina," she said.

"I'm not certain. I can't even venture a guess at present."

"Liar. I'm sure you have some idea. I suggest you talk it over with me before you tell Lydia."

She had struck right at the heart of the issue. I supposed I would have to tell her. It would mean trouble if the details reached Lydia's ears, especially because it could have proved fatal if something had gone wrong. Then again, I suspected she would be equally angry if I told her myself. I could already hear her voice.

"Why didn't you tell me right away?! Explain yourself!"

At the time, forcing a mana link with Tina had been my only option. Her mana had been out of control, for one thing. For the moment, Lydia believed my explanation that I had done it to help Tina cast spells, but I could only go so much longer without telling her about Frigid Crane, Tina's late mother, and the mysterious diary. The thought alone made me shiver.

I decided to at least keep the real reason I had failed the court sorcerer exam to myself. If Lydia found out that I'd lost my temper and beaten the second prince to a pulp because he'd mocked her and insulted my family, she'd be furious, then embarrassed, then draw her sword, weave her spells, and...

Of course, I couldn't let my family find out either. I knew just how my sister would sound—cold yet overcome with worry.

"Are you stupid, Allen? Why are you always *getting yourself into trouble?!"*

I-I can't help it! It's not like I go looking for it! Just look at the situation I'm in now; I don't stand a chance against Lisa. There's nothing I can do!

"Think of this as an ordeal," Anna suddenly told me, pulling me from my thoughts. "Now, look this way and smile."

I wish you'd stop reading my mind. I'm going to go through that video with a fine-tooth comb later. Oh, and don't forget to send the Howards duplicates of the video orbs you used today. After all, this is a historic occasion—the representatives of the incoming and current students are both from the same family.

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"I've got the gist of it," Lisa said. "That's an interesting idea."

"Thank you very much," I replied.

I had explained my experiences in the Howards' mansion to Lisa as we entered the academy grounds and walked along the small, verdant, ivy-covered path reserved for special guests. It would have caused serious trouble if we were overheard, so I'd asked Anna to cast a silencing spell to prevent eavesdropping.

"So, you believe there are two types of great spells?" Lisa asked. "Some that are just spells and others that resemble sentient magical creatures, like the one that seems to be inside Tina?"

"Yes," I replied, "but that's only a hypothesis. I don't have the data I would need to verify it. I can't even be sure that it really is Frigid Crane. I once searched the Leinster archives for information, but I drew a complete blank. Can you think of anywhere else I might look?"

"Let me think... Anna?"

"If you're looking for something similar in the House of Leinster, mistress, there is Lady Lydia's flaming sword," the head maid suggested.

"Yes," Lisa agreed, "but we know exactly where that sword came from. Elves, dwarves, and giants joined forces to forge it before the War of the Dark Lord. It's also not powerful enough to shake nations—cities at most."

The Four Great Dukedoms maintained spells, arts, and arms that symbolized their houses and were regarded with awe both in the kingdom and abroad. Those powers were popularly regarded as belonging to the same category as the great spells, which I had spent the past several years seeking and was currently researching ways to control due to Tina's situation. In reality, however, there were significant differences.

The supreme ice spell Blizzard Wolf was unmistakably orders of magnitude removed from the thing we had encountered and assumed to be the great spell Frigid Crane. Whatever Tina had unleashed, it had frozen Duke Howard’s Blizzard Wolf solid. That put it beyond the realm of any spell currently known.

“Did you ever meet Duchess Rosa Howard in person?” I asked Lisa.

“Before her illness. I met her several times at palace dinner parties when I was younger. She was cheerful, refined, and an accomplished sorceress. I’m sure she wasn’t mixed up in any trouble then. The only rumors I remember hearing were about how close she and Walter were. Perhaps something happened after she married into the House of Howard.”

“In which case, I’m at an impasse.”

“Allen, who else have you told about this?”

“Only Duke Walter and the professor. I believe Graham and Shelley Walker know as well; they’re in charge of the Howards’ internal affairs. I plan to tell the headmaster once the entrance ceremony is over.”

“That seems reasonable. Very well, I’ll assist you. I’ll contact the Howards, and we can leave anything related to great magic to the professor and headmaster. Anna.”

“Yes, mistress,” the head maid responded. “You wish to know about Duchess Rosa Howard, correct? She was married to one of the Four Great Dukes, and after years of investigation, the House of Howard is still unable to determine the cause of her death or rule out the possibility of assassination.” She paused for a moment. “This may take some time.”

“My humble apologies. Thank you for your cooperation,” I said, bowing deeply to the two women. They had come to my aid on many occasions over the past few years, and I was just thinking that I would need to repay them one day when Lisa gently touched my right hand.

“You’re such a silly boy,” she said. “Listen, Allen. A mother always helps her children—anything else is inconceivable—and your parents placed you in my care. Now, make me happy and ask for my help more often.”

“I-I’ll do my best,” I stammered.

My parents had met Duke and Duchess Leinster just once and dined with them in the royal capital. Lisa and my mother immediately hit it off, and they apparently still exchanged letters.

Pen pals with a duchess... There’s such a thing as being too *daring.*

"Oh, I almost forgot," Lisa added. "I have a favor to ask of you too. Will you lend me a hand? I'm afraid I can't give you any specifics; things are still up in the air."

"Weekends and the days leading up to them will be difficult, since that's when I tutor and prepare my lessons. I can manage any other time, though."

"I'll only need you on weekday afternoons. For the time being, at least. Think it over. Oh, there's the exit."

The ivy petered out and the end of the path came into view. It was time for the main event.

The Four Great Dukes, the Eight Great Marquesses, and most of the earls were away at the investiture of the new court sorcerers and knights of the royal guard, but their wives and any lesser nobles with children enrolling in the academy were presumably here for the ceremony. I feared they might speak ill of me, but I was there for my adorable students. I also needed to attend for Duke Walter, who I was sure had wanted to see Tina and his other daughter in their moment of triumph!

"That's what I psyched myself up for, anyway..."

"Allen? What are you muttering about?" Lisa asked.

"Oh, nothing. Just wondering what I'm doing here."

I looked down and saw a host of people in the temporary spectator seats erected dozens of tiers high on all sides of the arena, all waiting for the entrance ceremony to begin. Only the permanent seats had roofs overhead, so chaos would probably erupt if it started to rain.

All the seats faced the open space that normally served as the academy's practical testing ground, where Lydia and I had first crossed paths. I wondered why part of the wall looked strangely new.

Several hundred chairs stood in rows on the marble floor of the arena. The flooring must have been specially installed for the ceremony using earth magic, as the mana was still fresh. The raised dais for the officiating students and guest speakers was already in place, and a podium and several luxurious chairs were arranged atop it. The students had yet to enter, and the gates on the east and west sides of the arena were still closed.

Anna took pity on me as she poured hot water into a teapot. "Mr. Allen, you are in attendance as a representative of the House of Howard," she said. "Your presence is perfectly natural."

"That's true," I admitted, "but these seats are reserved for royalty and members of ducal houses. I don't think it's any place for the likes of me."

We were in the most exclusive seats on the highest tier of the stands. The area was furnished with the finest chairs, the atmosphere was relaxed, and the climate was perfectly controlled. It was designed so that we could see out, but no one outside could see in. It appeared that no royalty or members of other ducal houses were in attendance, so we had the place to ourselves.

Beside me, Lisa took an elegant sip of her black tea. "Delicious," she said. "Stop being so self-deprecating, Allen. Anna is correct—today, you represent the Howards at Duke Walter Howard's personal request. You're also practically my son. There's no reason you shouldn't be here."

"The mistress is correct," Anna added. "Everyone who came to greet us was quite complimentary. No one in the capital can call themselves well-informed and be ignorant of you!"

"Is that so?" I asked perfunctorily.

An uninterrupted stream of people had been coming to pay their respects to Duchess Lisa Leinster. Earls, viscounts, barons, and other mid-level nobility. Influential people from the royal and regional capitals. Wealthy merchants, veterans of their trades, who hoped to do business with the House of Leinster. The chiefs and other leaders of minority peoples, who wielded great authority despite being regarded as only quasi-nobility. There must have been dozens of them.

At first, I had hung back and done my best to stay out of the way, but Lisa would call me over every time. "Let me introduce you," she would say. "This is Allen. You might know him better as 'the Brain of the Lady of the Sword.' He's practically a son to me. I do hope you'll get along."

And the reactions that had elicited:

"Oh, so that's him."

"Ah! I'd only heard rumors! Duchess Lisa, you simply must tell me where you found him!"

"I wish to request a bout."

"My daughter is fifteen this year and looking for a husband."

"Thank you for all the help you gave my son at the university."

"Might I convince you to tutor my children?"

How odd... I wasn't expecting this. Everyone was extremely *pleasant. Do I have Lisa's presence to thank for that?*

"It's only natural," Anna noted, filling my teacup with practiced elegance.

"Thank you," I said. "What do you mean?"

The tea was wonderfully fragrant. Perhaps it was a new blend—the House of Leinster excelled at developing new products for sale. I occasionally got Lydia to share some of their wares with me, and they had been consistently delicious.

The head maid responded with an exaggerated show of exasperation. "I've always suspected that you were ignorant of your own qualities, Mr. Allen, and now I'm certain of it."

"I like to think that I have a fairly objective view of myself."

"Dear me," Anna replied, not seeming to believe me. "Oh, dear, dear me..."

"He really means it, Anna," Lisa cut in. "It may be an uncommon virtue, but really, what are we to do with him?"

"But mistress," Anna countered, "isn't this precisely why the young ladies put such firm trust in Mr. Allen?"

"I suppose so," Lisa admitted. "I'll leave setting him straight to them. Now, I believe I interrupted you. Please continue." Her tone was mild, but I suspected that I had just been given a lecture. Personally, I thought that I was overconfident, if anything.

"If you'll permit me to say so, Mr. Allen, you represent hope," Anna cheerfully resumed, bringing an index finger to her lips.

"Hope?" I repeated.

"That's right."

"I'm sorry, but I can't imagine what you mean."

"A charming, unknown young man freshly arrived from the eastern capital skips grades to graduate from the Royal Academy in just a single year—and second in his class, no less. He accumulates civil and martial honors and goes on to graduate from the Royal University as well, once again second in his class. He's on intimate terms with the professor and the headmaster of the Royal Academy, two of the most renowned wise men in the kingdom, and best of all, wherever the Lady of the Sword fights, he's there to support her! Surely he must have stepped out of a fairy tale. And now you have ties to the House of Howard as well. Whatever will you do next?"

Anna jubilantly counted her points on her fingers while Lisa listened with a smile. It was all rather—well, *extremely* embarrassing. Lydia deserved the credit for most of what was being said. I had certainly tried, but after all, I had still failed the court sorcerer exam.

I looked down, fanning my face with my hand to cool my burning cheeks, and that was when I spotted maids of the Leinster and Howard houses standing by in perfect recording positions. Each one carried a video orb and wore an earring with a communication orb embedded in it, although no type of orb came cheap. I could sense an intense determination to see beloved daughters and granddaughters at the entrance ceremony at any cost. I thought of the two dukes, who were on their way to the palace, and a certain butler who was stationed in the north. Their daughters and granddaughter certainly didn't lack for affection.

Anna resumed her cheerful commentary. "The House of Leinster has always been entirely in favor of the meritocracy now championed by His Majesty, and the other three ducal houses have followed suit. Still, I'm amazed at how much it has permeated society. And in the midst of that shift, you gallantly stepped onto the scene—and with Lady Lydia, at that. The daughter of a ducal house and a young commoner who earned a place at her side by his own merits—what could be more picture-perfect? Of course, all eyes were on Lady Lydia at first, but some people can be quite perceptive."

"I've been receiving frequent requests to arrange meetings with you lately," Lisa added. "And just look how popular you've been today. We must capture the pair of you on a video orb next time."

"Yes, mistress! You're exactly right!" Anna exclaimed. "Mr. Allen looks picturesque alone, but the two of them together are simply untouchable! Lady Lydia's charms, in particular, increase severalfold—no, several-*dozen*-fold! What could be more worthy of committing to video?! To anyone who knew Lady Lydia as a child, it's a veritable dream come true!"

"I'll admit that Lydia has grown into a beauty in the past few years," I said, "but I don't think I've changed much. Apart from my height, anyway. I did finally pass her there."

Lydia was quite tall, and she had kept growing after we started school together, so it had taken me a while to overtake her. It was one of the few areas in which I clearly surpassed her...the others being cooking, doing laundry, sewing, and putting people to bed.

Anna giggled. "Lady Lydia used to worry about that, you know. 'I want to stop getting taller,' she would say. 'Don't serve me any food that might make me grow!' Oh, what halcyon days those were. And if only you could have seen her when you passed her in height! To this day, I've never seen my lady so delighted. You have the full support of the Leinster Maid Corps so long as we can witness that sight!"

"Oh..." I said. "There was a period when she was giving me all sorts of foods and teas and so on that were supposed to make me taller. That explains why. Some of those things were awfully dubious, though."

"I gathered them myself. If you ever want to grow even taller, I shall present you with a myriad of rare goods imported from foreign lands."

I forced a chuckle. "I appreciate the sentiment."

The people who served the Ducal House of Leinster took intense pride in their work and seemed fanatically—*ahem, sincerely* devoted to their masters. They really looked as though they enjoyed their work. Of course, the Howards' servants had been much the same. I didn't know about the other two ducal houses, but I had to believe they were more strict.

"In any case, Mr. Allen," Anna continued, "I believe you should have more faith in yourself. It wouldn't hurt to regard yourself a tenth as highly as Lady Lydia and the other young ladies regard you."

"Modesty is a virtue," Lisa added, "and I think your parents did a wonderful job raising you. That said, excess is never a good thing. Consider it something to work on."

"I'll make sure to be careful," I conceded.

"Don't worry so much."

I bowed my head to both women. No one else would have put their critique of me so gently. So, excess was a vice. I would be sure to remember that.

The arena had started to buzz with activity; it seemed that the ceremony was about to begin. I looked up at the sky and saw that the clouds had grown even thicker. I hoped that it wouldn't rain until after the ceremony.

The shrill blare of trumpets filled the air, the gates swung open without warning, and spells flew out to burst over the testing ground. Lights scattered, and dazzling colors filled the air.

So, those will act as guides for the students filing in. That's a good idea. I just hope the girls aren't too nervous...

*

A beautiful magic circle appeared on the dais, followed by a female student in a flash of violet lightning.

The Royal Academy's students took the lead in events like entrance and graduation ceremonies. The student council, as the students' representative body, consequently exercised a lot of authority and frequently served as a point of contact for relations within the academy. If I remembered correctly, the new vice president had been the master of ceremonies at my entrance ceremony.

A round of applause rose from the onlookers, and the female student on the dais gave a slight bow. "Thank you very much. The Royal Academy entrance ceremony will now commence," she announced. Her voice carried with the help of applied wind magic and orbs installed throughout the arena so that—

Hm? I-I recognize this voice...

"Wh-What is *she* doing here?!"

I leaned forward and strained my eyes. Her beret hid her ears, but the hair I could see poking out the sides was silver-gray, and she had a bushy tail sticking out behind her. That settled it—the girl standing at attention on the dais and presiding over the ceremony was my younger sister Caren.

I had seen her just two days earlier, and her behavior then had been just as usual. All she had said to me was, "You've been far too neglectful of your one and only sister in the whole world lately. You wouldn't visit mom and dad with me, you took that tutoring job, you've been spending all your time at Lydia's place and the Howards' mansion... I'm leaving! This is your last chance to stop me. A bit of kindness might just put your adorable little sister in a better mood. You can't afford to pass up this opportunity."

I had indulged her, and then we had promised to eat lunch together after the entrance ceremony...but she hadn't said a word about this. She must have wanted to surprise me. She was levelheaded, but she was still too attached to me. Of course, she was so adorable that I'd forgive all her faults.

I wasn't related to my parents or to Caren by blood. My parents had been young traveling merchants when they had taken shelter from a rainstorm under the eaves of an abandoned house. It was there that they had found me, a wailing infant swaddled in cloth, and taken me in as their son. They had even given up their profession and settled down then and there.

There had been nothing to show where I came from, so my parents had given me my name as well. According to my mother, "It was the name of a legendary hero of our people. But if you grow up healthy and happy, that will be enough for me."

I will, mom. I'm doing fine.

My parents and Caren are beastfolk of the wolf clan, whose prowess in battle had once drawn the wonder of the entire continent. In the War of the Dark Lord two centuries prior, the wolf clan had fought valiantly...but sustained heavy losses. As a result, they were now a small minority even among beastfolk, who were already less numerous than the human population. Because all the boldest warriors of the wolf clan had fallen in battle, most of its current members preferred peace and were warm and kind to anyone they had ever recognized as family.

My sister was one of the few exceptions—an extremely rare case of atavism. She wasn't as strong as Lydia, but she *was* strong. Her swordsmanship, unarmed combat, and spellcasting were all first-rate. No one her age had ever been a match for her.

That said, the Royal Academy was packed with brilliant young people. Competition was fierce, and only the cream of the crop could join the student council. It was also an unwritten rule that the children of nobles took priority, and deep-rooted prejudice against beastfolk was alive and well. Caren could only have distinguished herself by being truly extraordinary. I had known that she was working hard, and I'd had faith in her, but her achievement still astounded me!

"Pardon my delayed introduction," Caren said to all those assembled. "My name is Caren. I am the student council vice president, and I will be presiding over this ceremony. As you can see, I am of the wolf clan. Please enjoy the ceremony."

The answering commotion from the crowd was mostly positive, but there were some jeers.

Well now. I hope you don't expect to last long in the royal capital after using foul language like that to my sister. I'll find out who all of you are later and make you regret it.

Anna interrupted my brooding. "Why, Mr. Allen, you look positively terrifying. Have no fear—the House of Leinster will address the matter privately."

"Sit down, Allen," Lisa added.

"I'm sorry," I said after taking a moment to regain my composure. "I couldn't help myself."

That won't do. I need to learn to let go of my sister as much as she needs to let go of me. Lydia is always finding fault with me for that.

"Now," Caren continued, "it is time for the incoming class to enter. Please give them a hearty round of applause."

A section of the marble floor began to glow, and students filed out of the east and west gates to thunderous applause. The leaders of the processions must have been upperclassmen. They were followed by new students in fresh uniforms. I had presumably looked just like them four years earlier when—

"You and Lady Lydia were flirting shamelessly from the moment you entered the arena," Anna chimed in. "I could hardly believe my eyes."

"I was shocked when she brought you home after your entrance exams. She'd never shown an interest in anything but swordplay before then." Lisa chuckled. "My husband stayed up late drinking that night."

"I wish you wouldn't read my mind like that," I told them after a pause. "Here come Lynne and Tina now. Wait, what have we here?"

The top two students in the incoming class should have been led straight to the dais instead of taking their seats on the floor of the arena with their classmates. Unless my eyes were playing tricks on me, however, Tina and Lynne were arguing with each other as they walked. The dresses they were both wearing made them easy to spot. The students near the pair seemed flustered. Ellie had placed highly on her entrance exam, so she was nearby, but not near enough to intervene.

Honestly. It's always something with those girls.

"They must be quite a handful," Lisa commented. Both she and Anna looked exasperated. "Allen?"

"I'll do what I can," I said.

Spellcasting was prohibited in the arena. If my attempt was detected and I came under attack, I would have only myself to blame.

What to do...? Ah, I've got it. They're a little far away, but I should be able to manage. The clouds will make it easier to pass off.

I conjured droplets of water above Tina and Lynne—taking great care to camouflage my spells, of course—and let them fall onto the girls' faces as they walked. That was enough to stop their argument, but I followed with a faint breeze that brushed their ears. It operated on the same principle as the maids' communication earrings and delivered a simple message: "Quiet." The spell could only convey single words, but it required almost no mana and carried little risk of being overheard. When I was younger, I had often used it to startle children and adults alike.

Tina and Lynne resumed walking. It seemed they had gotten the message.

"Marvelously done," Anna remarked.

"I see you've improved your stealth again," Lisa added. "But wouldn't the wind have sufficed on its own?"

"I considered how the students near them would react. It doubled as a punishment," I explained.

"So you have a mean streak," Lisa observed. "And if any student could detect one of your spells, I'd recruit them on the spot."

"At least one of them did," I noted as I pointed to the dais, where Caren was looking up at me. She might not have been able to see us, but I'd told her that I would be in attendance, and I had often used that spell to tease her when she was younger. Of course she would notice.

I could see her lips moving, but at that distance, I couldn't possibly—

"'Are you an idiot, Allen? Expect a talking-to later. And thanks,'" Anna suddenly interpreted. "My, what a loving sister you have," she chirped.

"I'm more impressed by you at the moment," I said after a pause.

"You exaggerate! I am but a humble maid!" She curtsied with a smile. I could never figure her out. Of course, I knew that she was Lisa's right-hand woman and managed all the maids in the Leinsters' service—of whom there were more than one thousand—so I ought to have been less surprised by her impressive capabilities.

The music stopped. The majority of the roughly three hundred new students were finally in their seats. Three hundred might sound like a lot, but I saw the number in a different light, considering that only about half of them would manage to graduate in three years.

Tina and Lynne were seated in the ornate chairs on the dais.

The older students overseeing the ceremony began to panic. One of them approached Caren and whispered something in her ear.

Rain? What awful timing. Actually, I suppose I should take it as a perfect opportunity for him *to make his entrance. He'd never pass up this chance; he loves putting on a show.*

The spectators began to murmur, but Caren calmly spoke over them. "Silence, please. I would ask you all to look to the sky."

All eyes peered upward. In the air above hovered a sorcerer in a hooded robe. He raised the staff he was holding above his head and a barrier spread from it in all directions. His spell formula was delicate. Part of me doubted its practicality in a combat situation, but I supposed that was none of my business—the man was a veteran fighter and had even served in the War of the Dark Lord. Once the barrier closed over the arena, he vanished and reappeared in his seat on the dais.

"The gentleman who just erected a barrier against the rain is the headmaster of the Royal Academy: Lord Rodde, 'the Archmage.' He will greet you shortly," Caren explained. "Headmaster, thank you very much."

The elven man, who had now removed his hood, raised one hand to enthusiastic cheers. He was so theatrical.

"All 309 members of our incoming class are now seated. Permit me to greet you all."

So, the new vice president—Caren, in this case—would be giving the opening remarks. The same thing had happened for my first year. Almost nothing about the ceremony was set in stone, with the exception of the headmaster's address—infamous as the mightiest sleeping spell in the kingdom—and speeches from the head of the incoming class and a representative of the student body.

"I'd like to congratulate the entire incoming class. As I said earlier, I am Caren, your student council vice president. I'm sure that the head of this year's incoming class, Tina Howard, and our student council president, Stella Howard, have moving speeches to give you, so I'll be brief. As you have surely realized, the representatives of our new and current students are sisters—a first in the long history of the Royal Academy. Please remember that all of you are fortunate to be here, and spend your time at the academy well."

Caren's words were met with wild applause—including from me. I wasn't exactly impartial, but I thought she had done that flawlessly. I would have to get a video orb of it later.

She raised one hand, signaling an end to the applause.

That's the way. You look great.

"Now, I'd like to invite the representative of the incoming class to say a few words. Tina Howard."

Tina shot to her feet like a flicked spring. I hoped she would be all right.

"Tina, please come here."

Despite Caren's coaxing, Tina remained motionless. I was just thinking that I would have to risk another spell when Lisa motioned me to stop.

"She'll be fine," she said. Her delicate finger pointed to Lynne, who had risen to her feet alongside Tina and was now saying something to her.

"They're saying... 'Let me do it if you can't; I'm fully prepared. I'm certain that Allen will praise me for it,'" Anna interpreted. "'What?!' 'Make up your mind already. We don't have time to wait for you.' I see that Lady Tina has begun walking now."

Can her vision really be that *good?* I wondered.

Tina had started walking toward the podium, albeit stiffly. I supposed she hadn't completely overcome her nerves. I wished that I had done a better job of encouraging her—there were so many things I could have tried. I shouldn't have optimistically assumed that she would do fine.

Without warning, Lisa prodded my cheek. I turned to look at her in surprise and found a mother's love on her face, which was so like Lydia's. "Allen, have faith in your students," she said.

"I-I'll try."

"Mr. Allen," Anna said, calling my attention back to the dais. Once Tina reached the podium, Caren gave her a shove on the back and stepped aside. The spectators stopped talking, and soon there was total silence.

Tina brushed a hand against her ribbon before returning her arm to her side. She then faced straight ahead and began to speak.

*

My name is Tina Howard. It is my honor to deliver this address as the head of this year's incoming class. I sincerely apologize for subjecting you all to my undignified conduct just now; I've never spoken in front of so many people before, and I'm somewhat—no, *extremely* nervous. Nevertheless, I feel that this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and I intend to speak my mind.

When I learned that I would be speaking here today, I was beset by worries. Did I really deserve this? Could it be some kind of mistake? Was I merely dreaming?

I experienced these feelings because, as many of you here are aware, people have called me "the Howards' cursed child" for almost my entire life. Although I was born into one of the Four Great Dukedoms, I was utterly incapable of using magic. I was defective. Worthless. A stain on my family's honor. A pitiful girl cursed from birth. Some would ask whether I really was Duke Howard's daughter. They said many other things about me too—far too many things for me to remember them all.

Although my father, my sister, and all those who serve our family showed me love, I could feel dark emotions piling up like snow within me. But I still yearned to cast spells. I was determined to learn, no matter what it took. First and foremost, I wanted to fulfill a personal dream of mine; I won't deny that. Yet...I would be lying if I told you that the negative emotions were not part of what drove me.

I wanted to get back at the people who scorned me! I wanted to fling the words they crushed me with back in their faces! And one day, I would do it. One day!

But reality was cruel. By the time I reached the age of thirteen, even elementary magic was still beyond me. I'd worked as hard as I knew how, frantically poring over reference books, studying on my own and under dozens of teachers, whom I got to research many things for me. And yet...not a flicker of flame. Not a drop of water. Not a grain of earth. Not the slightest gust of wind. Not the smallest crackle of lightning. Not the faintest hint of light or darkness. I could not command a single element—not even ice, the specialty of the Howards.

To be honest...I had given up hope. I was convinced that I would never cast a spell. That I would live out my life quietly in the north. That I had no choice but to know my place and stop hoping for more. That there was no one—no one in the whole wide world—who would save a hopeless case like me.

But now, here I am, at the head of the Royal Academy's incoming class, even though I was completely incapable of spellcasting until three months ago.

As I said earlier, I can't get rid of the thought that my standing here and giving this speech to all of you is just...a happy dream. I suspect that the next thing I know, I'll wake up in a room where I'd gone to cry in secret. At the same time, if this *is* a dream, it's such a pleasant one that I sincerely wish I'll never wake from it.

I am able to use magic because of a certain someone I met. Without him, I wouldn't be here today; I'd be back in my room, reading books and tending to my plants.

I'm grateful to that person. I can never thank him enough. But I also resent him a little—just the smallest amount. Learning to use magic had always been my dream, and he gave me that magic—real magic. But at the same time, I learned that my dream coming true wasn't the answer to all of my problems. I learned that Tina Howard is a bad girl, that even after she stumbled upon the miracle that taught her spellcasting—the miracle that she had been so desperate for—she's wretched enough to want more.

There is no end to human desire.

Just being able to cast spells isn't enough for me now. I can't be content with that. I want more, more, more! I want to learn all sorts of different spells. I want to reach that person, or even just come closer to him. I want to be able to do something to repay him. I want to be able to pass on the miracle I received to someone else someday.

I'm chasing those new dreams now. I'm sure that there's a hard road ahead of me, full of challenges that I can't even imagine—challenges that will make even earning admission to the Royal Academy seem like child's play.

Should I give up, then? Don't I have enough already?

No. I can't do that. After all, I've learned that dreams *can* come true! I've made up my mind to keep working as hard as I possibly can to achieve my new dreams.

Today, I'm glad that I've enrolled in the Royal Academy—that I have the opportunity to learn in this great place, with all its traditions. I'm sure that my classmates are uneasy to have the likes of me at the head of our class, but I hope you will all move forward with me. I will strive to uphold the Howard name.

I've ended up leaving this for last, but I am sincerely grateful to my late mother; to my father, who raised me with love; to my sister, whom I admire; to our head butler Graham and head maid Shelley; to my childhood friend Ellie, who came all this way with me; and to all the people who have shown me affection while serving my family. I love you all from the bottom of my heart, and I hope that you will continue to support me.

I'm going to overtake you one day, so you'd better be ready, because I'm the most stubborn girl there is!

Thank you very much for listening.

*

After Tina bowed and took her seat, a realization and a stir swept through the crowd, which had been listening to her with rapt attention. Ice crystals were drifting—practically dancing—through the air over the whole arena in response to her mana. It was a fantastical sight.

I stood up and applauded for all I was worth. Lisa followed suit from her seat beside me, as did Anna from her station behind us. Little by little, the warm applause spread, until it was coming from the whole arena.

I'm so glad I took this tutoring job. I truly am.

Lisa giggled. "I see that she's awfully fond of you, Allen. Lydia will be jealous."

Tina was an earnest girl. I was sure that before she'd met me, she had suffered more exclusion and hurt than I had imagined in her struggle with her inability to cast spells. I was so glad that the Howard household had taken her side; I shuddered to think what might have happened otherwise. From my perspective, that was the real miracle.

It might be true that I had created an opportunity for her, but she had made her own dream come true. All I had given her was a helping hand and a push forward. But she was still grateful to me.

You've done enough, I thought. *You've already repaid me.*

"Here." Lisa reached over and offered me a handkerchief. "Dry your eyes."

I took a brief moment to compose myself and then managed a quiet, "Thank you."

"Allen."

"Yes?"

"You've done well."

For a moment, I didn't quite know how to respond. I eventually mustered another thank-you as I wiped away the tears that kept streaming down my face. I must have looked pathetic. I seemed to remember having burst into tears during Caren's entrance ceremony too, so I supposed I was easily moved.

Anna giggled ecstatically. "This will make a lovely souvenir for Lady Lydia!"

"I wouldn't, Anna," Lisa warned her. "She'll sulk and grumble that he hasn't cried for her yet."

Anna froze for a moment. "Oh! I-I suppose that's true!" she exclaimed. "I sometimes find myself thinking that I might be safe from Lady Lydia now—possibly thanks to you and Mr. Allen suppressing her Firebird—but this would put me in mortal peril! I had better archive it for future use."

How can she be unfazed at a time like this? I wondered.

Just as I was trembling in awe of the Leinsters' head maid, Caren returned to the podium. "Thank you. And thank you, headmaster, for providing another wonderful display," she said, dismissing the dancing ice crystals as a bit of showmanship. The headmaster was holding up his staff, skillfully playing along. "Next, our student council president, Stella Howard, has a message for you all."

Caren looked calm—to the untrained eye, at least. Tina talking about me must have rubbed her the wrong way.

A female student who had been sitting in the first row on the arena floor took Caren's place at the podium and gave a deep bow. The hair peeking out from beneath her beret was the same color as Tina's—platinum with a tinge of pale blue. I couldn't see her face, but the way she carried herself bespoke a good upbringing.

There was a round of applause from the spectators. Once it subsided, the female student began to speak in a calm, assured voice.

*

My name is Stella Howard, and I am the president of the Royal Academy student council. I would like to extend my congratulations to all new students for their admission to our academy, and to their parents and guardians as well. Two years ago, I stood where you do now. I can still recall how nervous I felt.

As you know, this academy is the finest educational institution in our kingdom. Its entrance examinations are rigorous, and I have no doubt that you are all proud of yourselves for having passed them. But this is only the beginning. Your true studies are yet to come.

Just over three hundred of you will be starting your lives at the Royal Academy today. If you continue to advance without difficulty, you will graduate in three years. *If* you advance without difficulty.

In reality, only about half of you will be able to graduate three years from now. The average student takes four or five years to graduate from the Royal Academy. While it is possible to skip years, only three students in the past decade have done so. One of those three was Lady Lydia Leinster, the Lady of the Sword. She and one other student succeeded in graduating in just a single year, but you should consider those the most exceptional of cases.

I realize how intimidating this may sound, but this academy is extremely demanding. Your studies will be difficult and your training harsh. You'll have so many assignments to do on weekends that I doubt you'll have much time to enjoy yourselves. But this is also a place that will help you to grow immensely. I may be the eldest daughter of the Ducal House of Howard, but when I first enrolled here, my placement was closer to the bottom of my class than to its head. Yet I promise you that if you keep improving day by day, a path ahead will open for you.

Everything that you need to grow is here. Never give up; keep moving forward. I look forward to meeting all of you at the academy.

Finally, I'd like to make a personal remark—Tina, Ellie, congratulations. Your struggles are far from over, but I wish you the best!

*

Another round of applause filled the arena, albeit more reserved than the previous one.

Stella was exactly like Duke Walter had told me. She was too tense, like Tina had been when I'd first met her. The Royal Academy *was* demanding, but only if you insisted on doing absolutely everything it asked of you. If you knew how to manage yourself, you could actually end up with quite a bit of free time. The system probably had its roots in the headmaster's twisted personality, like the problems on the written test, which he would get angry at you for answering completely. He really was a hassle—just like a certain professor I knew.

"I see Stella is an archetypal eldest daughter," Lisa remarked. "Lydia might benefit from a share of her earnestness."

"Lady Lydia is extremely earnest already, mistress," Anna said.

"That's true. Perhaps it's courage that she lacks. Still, I'm not certain it would be good for her to lean too far in that direction." Lisa chuckled. "What do you think, Allen?"

I took a moment to consider. "I think she would be difficult to deal with either way."

Stella took her seat beside Tina, who began chatting to her in apparent excitement.

"Next," Caren announced, "the headmaster will give his..."

So, it was finally time. All those who knew of the headmaster's address feared it as the most powerful sleeping spell in existence, said to have lulled even a raging demonic beast to slumber. I was just thinking that I could do with a good nap when the door opened and a maid slipped into the room.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am," the maid said to Anna before whispering something into her ear. Anna relayed the message to Lisa, and then Lisa to me, like a game of telephone.

"Allen, there's a message for you from the palace. Lydia is going berserk, specifics unknown. Go and stop her—I'm sure it will be more invigorating than staying here for a nap."

She'd picked today, of all days, to cause a commotion? I hadn't even seen everything I'd come to see at the ceremony yet.

"Anna," I implored the head maid.

"I take it you're concerned about missing the silver decorations awarded for first and second place on the entrance exam," Anna said. "Have no fear."

"Thank you so much. Goodbye, Lisa."

"Take care," Lisa said in response. "I'll explain things to the girls. Look after my daughter for me."

"I will."

"May fortune favor you, Mr. Allen," Anna added. "I will follow you shortly."

I'll certainly need as much fortune as I can get, I thought as I bowed slightly to both women and left my seat. Honestly, Lydia was — Was she all right? I hoped that she wasn’t hurt. Of course, it was probably no use worrying about her. After all, the Lady of the Sword was the best there ever was or would be.

Chapter 2

“I’m so sorry. I know you were at the Royal Academy entrance ceremony today.”

When I arrived at the entrance of the royal guard’s maneuvering ground, escorted by a palace guard, I found Lydia and Lynne’s older brother, the future Duke Leinster, waiting for me. His Highness, Lord Richard Leinster was the very image of a knight—tall and handsome, with a head of curly red hair. He was also decked out in his magnificent knight’s uniform; he must have been participating in the ceremony. I couldn’t help being impressed by his looks the moment I laid eyes on him.

Oh no. I feel as though he just beat me at something.

After all, he was also the enemy of any man who was unlucky in love. He had once casually told me, “I’m quite a hit with the ladies in the guard, you know? Still, I’m engaged, and I can’t exactly date my subordinates. It’s not easy having to turn them down and send them away in tears every time.”

All right, I’ll admit it: I had no luck in love at the Royal Academy, or at the university either!

What a depressing admission. Of course, because a certain someone had dragged me along when she’d skipped years of school, I didn’t have many friends my own age, and my plate had been more than full with a string of difficult problems over the past four years. The few female friends I had managed to make had all become distant at some point or another, and while I was confident that my underclassmen at the university didn’t dislike me, they *were* always smirking at me. But I digress.

Lord Richard was one of the two vice commanders of the knights of the royal guard and was ranked second in the organization. His glorious accomplishments over the past few years included subduing massive bandit gangs and monsters. The able nobleman was twenty-five years old and, like myself, a victim—we both tended to get drawn into danger and wind up holding the short end of the stick.

Victims of whom, you ask? I imagine you can deduce that for yourself.

"It's been far too long, Your Highness." I greeted Richard deferentially, mindful of the other knights nearby.

"Give it a rest, Allen," he told me. "We know each other too well to stand on ceremony, and they're all veterans I can trust. You can relax."

"Thank you, Richard. I'd love to catch up with you, but it doesn't look as though we have time for that."

"You've got that right," he admitted after a rueful pause. I couldn't tell if the look in his eyes was resignation or enlightenment—at any rate, he was exhausted. He seemed to comprehend the cruel destiny that lay in store for him.

I had been catching glimpses of what was going on behind him for some time, and I could hear the clash of swords and the roar of spells activating. I mustered the courage needed to take a proper look, turned my eyes to what was happening in the maneuvering ground...and groaned.

What does she think this is, an execution ground? Doesn't she realize we're in the middle of the royal capital?

I promptly looked away again. I'm convinced that, sometimes, escapism is the best thing for a person.

"It appears we're running out of time," I said. "She's furious. What's the plan?"

"We don't have much longer before they're all wiped out. And once they are, I'm next," Richard explained. "I assume my mother knows about this too, and that means my life hangs by a thread! Oh, how I curse my ill fortune. Allen, I want your sympathy and comfort. Please get me out of this!"

"I sympathize with your position, and I can offer you some comfort," I said. "But Richard..."

"Yes?"

"I wish you'd stop using me as a human shield."

Richard was cowering out of sight behind me; he knew that Lydia had good eyes. I wished he would just face her himself.

"Allen, I'm merely a knight of the guard," he said. "You can't expect me to face her head-on when she's angry. I don't have the kind of deviant kink it would take to willingly charge into purgatory!"

"But you don't mind sending me?" I asked.

"I'm sure you'll be all right," he said. "You may lose a little blood, but some sacrifices have to be made."

"You could have phrased that in a less unsettling manner."

The number of people standing in the maneuvering ground was decreasing ever faster as we spoke; they truly wouldn't last much longer.

I guess I've got no choice, I thought as I shoved Richard ahead of me as a shield. *Don't bother resisting; it's my belief that hardships should be shared. Now stop struggling and let's go die*—ahem, try *to sort this out.*

"S-Stop it, Allen! Th-Think of my lovely, lovely fiancée!" Richard begged.

"I know," I said. "It's strange, but that makes me want to bring you with me even more. Death is just what a knight with women falling all over him deserves! But don't worry—you'll get off with moderate burns. Probably. I hope. You'll live, in any case; she knows how to hold back, albeit not by much."

"Y-You call that 'holding back'?! Th-The only people who can laugh off her attacks are you and my mother!"

"Lisa is so far beyond me that there's no comparison. Anyway, she's like a playful cat; she could never seriously hurt someone she cares about."

Richard took a moment to process my words. "I can't believe you really mean that," he grumbled, slumping exhaustedly. "O God, why must you give me such trials? Please, save them all for Allen—I'm sure my sister would like that."

I'm sorry to say that she won't hesitate to slice up any run-of-the-mill god.

We were approaching the maneuvering ground one step at a time. A reek of blood filled the air, accompanied by screams and faint cries of pain.

I can't let the girls see this, I thought. *They might stain their dresses, for one thing. Hm, what's this? What are you sobbing like that for, Richard? Keep your feet moving. One, two. One, two. There; that's the spirit.*

"She's a nice girl, deep down. You know that as well as I do," I said, keeping my voice gentle, as though I were soothing a small child. "Can't you have some faith in your sister?"

"Now I know just what my sisters are talking about when they call you mean," Richard answered listlessly.

How rude. I'm kind to everyone, no matter the time or place—I just make an exception for knights with women falling all over them.

I pushed my cowering shield ahead of me, and my field of view suddenly expanded.

Beheld from a bird's-eye view, the royal guard's maneuvering ground was a circle surrounded by a stone wall that came up to about my shoulders. Now that I was looking at it again, it bore a striking resemblance to the training ground at the Howards' mansion; they might originally have been built to the same plan.

The maneuvering ground was equipped with magnificent spectator seating unbefitting a military facility because it also played host to the kingdom's annual martial arts competition. Tickets were popular and hard to come by, or so I heard—I'd never had to obtain them myself since on both occasions I'd attended, it had been as a "plus one." Still, the competition was a special occasion. The facility was primarily for the knights' use, so it was even more solidly built than the Royal Academy and nearly impervious to damage—or at least it should have been.

A gruesome scene spread out before me. The walls were covered in sword cuts, some of which extended to the highest row of spectator seats—others threatened to reach all the way to the royal palace itself. That was odd; no spell should have been able to inflict that kind of damage.

Lydia's opponents were knights—apparently young members of the royal guard. The ones in white gold-embroidered robes, desperately weaving spells with their long staves, must have been court sorcerers. It appeared that some of them were fresh appointees; their equipment was brand new.

More than ten of them were already slumped, motionless, against the walls. A number of broken swords and staves lay abandoned or stuck in the ground, which was also scattered with fragments of rent shields, helmets, and breastplates. Even the court sorcerers' robes, which were woven with powerful magical barriers, were torn and stained with red. Blood pooled in several places.

The only ones left standing were— Oh, she laid low the last four in one fell swoop. One after another, they crashed into the structure with renewed screams and cries of pain and then fell still. If this had been one of the popular board games currently making the rounds in the royal capital, it would have been a total victory.

"Is that all? After all your bragging, that's all you can do? And you call yourselves knights of the guard and court sorcerers? You'd need to train for another ten thousand years to get good enough to look down your noses at him." Lydia coldly judged them, turning slowly as she spoke. "What kind of training have you been doing to end up—"

The next instant, a Firebird took flight. Richard shrieked.

Oh, honestly... I thought as I vaulted over the wall and scattered the spell with a wave of my right hand. "I can't say I approve of your abruptness. And that spell is no substitute for a hello."

"Wh-What are you doing here? I-I didn't sense your mana at all," Lydia stammered. "My stupid brother!"

Richard chuckled. "I do everything I possibly can to survive in the moment, even if that means I won't live to see the sun rise tomorrow—that's the Richard Leinster way!" I would have agreed with about half of that had he not been retreating at full speed while he said it.

"So, what happened?" I asked. "Lisa won't like you getting violent on your big day."

"B-Be quiet!" Lydia shouted. After a short pause, she added, "And what kind of coward hides his mana until he gets this close?! It's not fair! I refuse to accept it!"

"You would have run away if you knew I was coming and then lost your temper if I didn't chase you," I said. "Whenever you swing your sword, the brunt of it always falls on— There are no traces of mana. Richard?"

"What?" the vice commander called back. He had reached the stands and secured a seat for himself. It appeared that a small group of eccentrics was also spectating in spite of the danger.

"A new challenger! My money's on him!"

"Are you blind? That lad won't stand a chance."

"I'm betting on the long shot!"

"I'll keep to the safe bet. It's the Lady of the Sword for me."

"Ha! I shall stake everything on a draw!"

"Do you know something we don't, Squad Commander?"

"Chilled fruit juice, going cheap!"

It was hard to be mad at them when they were taking it that far. The crowd included people who appeared to be high-ranking nobles in addition to knights of the royal guard and court sorcerers. If they had been summoned to the investiture ceremony, they must have been earls at the least. Something about that unnerved me, but

I couldn’t quite put my finger on it.

Oh well. It can wait.

“Did someone challenge her to a fight with swords alone?” I asked Richard.

“They did indeed!” he affirmed. “The rookies on the ground there were calling you a—”

“Repeat it and you won’t even live to see the moon rise tonight,” Lydia said, cutting him off.

Richard gave a forced laugh. “Actually, it’s completely slipped my mind!” he declared.

“Listen, Lydia,” I said.

“What?” she asked after a brief silence.

“Thank you.”

“I-I didn’t do this for you,” she stammered. A beat later, she added, “I didn’t, okay? D-Don’t get the wrong idea!” She wasn’t terribly convincing when even her ears flushed as she said it—not that she wasn’t downright adorable at times like this.

Hey, don’t shake like that.

Still, challenging her to a sword fight had been beyond reckless. Her Firebird was a powerful spell, but the albatross around my neck was known as “the Lady of the Sword” for a reason. One would have to be crazy to assume that she would be weaker without her magic.

I offered her my right hand with a wry grin. “Come on. Let’s go. The entrance ceremony must have ended without incident by now, and the Leinsters and Howards will be holding a delicious feast tonight to celebrate—wine included. Haven’t you had your fill of violence?”

The willful noblewoman fixed me with a sulky glare. “No.”

“No? Really?” I asked.

“That wasn’t nearly enough.”

For the umpteenth time that day, I had a bad feeling about what was going to happen next—and this one was worse than the rest. Lydia grabbed a knight’s sword sticking out of the ground near her and tossed it to me. I rested one hand on my forehead and sighed as I caught it; it was easy to predict what she would say.

Oh dear. Why does she look like she’s enjoying this so much?

“So,” she said, “keep me company once in a while.”

*

I swelled with satisfaction at a job well done. My lovely little sister had been positively radiating bloodlust, but that had all vanished without a trace as soon as I'd offered her Allen as a sacrifice—*ahem*, present.

"That was a nice bit of work," I remarked to myself. "It ought to defuse the situation and keep me out of harm's way. Now I've just got to think up a strategy for dealing with my mother."

"I quite agree. This may be the ideal solution, given how taken Lady Lydia is with Mr. Allen. But that, Lord Richard, is beside the point. How could the future Duke Leinster cower in fear of his own sister and offer up his future brother-in-law? The mere thought fills this humble maid with sorrow. I might even weep."

A shudder ran up my spine. I frantically looked over my shoulder, but there was no one there. Had I imagined it? For a moment, I'd thought that our head maid, the pride and terror of my house, was already here.

Maybe I'm tired. I'll get my fiancée to comfort me on my next day off.

"I believe your time might be better spent thinking of ways to survive the scolding that the mistress has in store for you. After all, she and Lady Lynne are fond of Mr. Allen as well—Lady Lydia isn't alone in that regard. That being the case, perhaps you ought to go see her first. It might be your last chance before you are parted permanently," the angel of death said cheerfully from the seat beside me.

"A-Anna?!" I shrieked, leaping to my feet and backing away from her.

"Yes, my lord. Anna, head maid to the Ducal House of Leinster and president of the Society for Watching over Lady Lydia and Lady Lynne in Public and Private. I have come on my mistress's orders," she replied. "Sir Knight, might I have one of those drinks as well? I'm simply parched."

There sat our head maid. She had chestnut hair and a figure that left much to be desired in one particular area. She *said* that she was thirsty, but you would never guess it from looking at her—her brow was free of sweat, and her clothes were in perfect order. She was recording the maneuvering ground with a video orb in her left hand.

It's just going to end without a fuss anyw— Lydia pulled a knight's sword out of the ground and tossed it to Allen, who caught it with a rueful smile while keeping his distance from her. *Hang on… Don't tell me they want to keep going!*

Lydia had surpassed me a long time ago. Only a handful of swordsmen and sorcerers in the whole kingdom were able to face her head-on. I knew that Allen was a capable sorcerer, and I'd heard that he was the only person my sister trusted to watch her back, but facing her in a swordfight? That was just foolhardy! I needed to stop them!

Before I even had the chance, however, I was restrained by the head maid. "Hm. Not bad, but hardly good enough for the House of Leinster," she commented, sipping her fruit juice. "Lord Richard, interrupting a lovers' tryst is the height of boorishness. Kindly return to your seat."

"Y-You call this a tryst?"

"It's beginning."

Anna pointed to the maneuvering ground. In an instant, Lydia vanished from sight. Her disappearance was followed by a high-pitched metallic clang—Allen had just blocked a strike from Lydia Leinster, the Lady of the Sword, one of the finest swordswomen in the kingdom, without so much as breaking a sweat.

A stir ran through the group that had been absorbed in betting on the duel, and who could blame them? None of the knights of the royal guard or court sorcerers my sister had just run roughshod over had managed to block even a single blow.

After a few more clashes, Lydia suddenly leapt to one side. I was still wondering why when chains of earth rose from the ground in pursuit. Dozens of spell formulae appeared in the air around my sister, cutting off her escape on all sides as they activated one after another. She countered by slicing through the spell formulae themselves, securing space to evade as she sprinted across the maneuvering ground. She was taking advantage of the opening to close distance with Allen, who was keeping out of reach of her sword as he blocked or evaded the slashes that slipped through his bombardment of elementary water, earth, and lightning spells.

No way. Am I really seeing this? What kind of spell formulae are those?! They're definitely not by the book.

Offensive spells typically deployed in front of the caster. An experienced fighter might deploy a spell from above or below to catch an opponent off guard, but not against a fast-moving close-range fighter like Lydia—that made it many times more challenging to aim even a single spell. Controlling that many at the same time was just—

“Lord Richard, you’re blocking the view from the seats behind you,” Anna warned me. “Please sit down.”

The head maid apparently found this spectacle unsurprising. Still, did she have to give me that disappointed look, like I ought to know better? I mean, this was the Lady of the Sword we were talking about! Lydia might be my sister, but she was also basically a monster. How could a sorcerer like Allen put up so much of a fight against her?

I went to sink back into my chair, but Anna stopped me with an emphatic shake of her head. “Who said you could sit *there*?” she asked. “The mistress commanded me to ‘make you repent.’” After a moment, she added, “And you were just having unkind thoughts about my physical characteristics. Sit down right where you are, *Young Master* Richard.”

“O-On the ground?” I asked. “I-I have a reputation to consider.”

“Sit down.”

“L-Listen, I can’t just—”

“Sit.”

“...Yes, ma’am.”

Anna was strict. This brought back memories of my childhood. I hoped that my subordinates and the spectators weren’t watching.

D-Don’t look at me now! I-It was an emergency! I was justified in my actions! There was nothing else I could do to save my own skin! One look at what’s going on in front of you should make that obvious! Besides, he’s stronger than I thought he was, so— Huh? A-Are we up north? It’s awfully chilly all of a sudden.

“Young master,” Anna said, “do you understand why you’re being forced to sit?”

“Because I tried to make him clean up a mess that the royal guard helped cause,” I ventured. “And because I thought about your—”

“My what? And you’re half correct.”

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. Please just don’t kill— Only half...?”

“See for yourself.”

Confused, I turned my attention back to the maneuvering ground in time to see Lydia break through Allen’s hail of spells and close in on him, swinging her sword. Allen frantically blocked a few strokes and tumbled on the ground to avoid others—staining his formal wear and mussing his neatly coiffed hair in the process.

"Do you understand now?" Anna asked.

"He's at a disadvantage at close quarters."

"No. Mr. Allen dressed in formal wear and had his hair styled today because he would be attending the Royal Academy entrance ceremony. Have you any idea how much time Lady Lydia spent selecting that outfit? Mr. Allen is a sensible young man—he rarely consents to appear in public in clothes prepared for him by the House of Leinster. And you, Lady Lydia's own brother, permitted your subordinates to spoil one of those precious opportunities for her!"

"Th-That's what you're mad about?" I stammered. "B-But Lydia is destroying his outfit herself! I don't have jurisdiction over the court sorcerers either!"

"Young master, that is beside the point."

"Oh, come on..." I felt bad about the situation and planned to take responsibility, but really, shouldn't she be more concerned that he might get hurt?!

"There's nothing out of the ordinary about Lady Lydia roughhousing with Mr. Allen. I dare say she does it mostly for attention...among other things. There's no question of her injuring him—my lady is far too skilled for that."

Lydia sliced and wove her way through countless elementary spells to close in on Allen for the umpteenth time. To my surprise, she was grinning from ear to ear as she struck with terrifying speed. Allen just barely fended off her strikes and unleashed another barrage of elementary spells, putting distance between them again.

They repeated those same steps over and over again. Unlike the first time, Allen showed no sign of rolling around on the ground to avoid Lydia's strikes. He kept a fixed distance and constructed "corridors" of elementary spells; it looked like he was trying to limit the direction of her attacks.

A commotion started among the knights and mages watching the bout as they began to realize what was going on. I knew just how they felt—"superhuman" didn't even begin to describe it. How many knights or court sorcerers could pull off something like that?

Come to think of it, why isn't Lydia casting Firebird? She hasn't used a single offensive spell this whole time. I don't see why she would stick to the rules from her last fight, unless...

Anna nodded. "Lady Lydia limits herself to physical enhancement spells and refrains from all offensive magic, while Mr. Allen casts only elementary spells. Do you understand the significance of those rules?"

"You mean this is a form of communication?" I asked.

"Precisely. Neither one of them is in earnest. As far as Lady Lydia is concerned, this is merely a display of affection, and she's always in a wonderful mood afterward. Mr. Allen is a master of indulging her."

Aha ha ha. Maybe my eyes have finally given out on me, because the fight I'm seeing wouldn't be out of place in the tournament finals.

The crowd in the stands—the same people who had been shouting about betting a mere moment ago—was now debating with serious looks on their faces. The knights and sorcerers seemed especially tense.

There! That's the reaction I was looking for! I'm glad you agree! This maid who just keeps filming is the crazy— Uh, forget I said anything.

"Anna, do you think you could beat him?" I asked frankly.

"That's a good question," she replied. "Were I ever to encounter him on the battlefield, I suppose I would begin by considering how to escape."

So not even Anna, the leader of the House of Leinster's covert operatives, a woman who had passed through countless dangers with a smile and even forced my mother to draw her sword, would consider fighting Allen. I might have seriously underestimated him. Lydia liked him, and I had heard a variety of rumors about their exploits, but most of those rumors had centered on my sister. It seemed that very few people accurately gauged Allen's abilities. I was no exception, even though I knew him personally. I could only imagine that others had even lower opinions of him.

The rumors about the court sorcerer exam were true, then. Prince Gerard had lost badly to Allen and then raised objections to make him fail the exam in retaliation. I could hardly believe it.

"Now do you understand why Mr. Allen is hailed as Lady Lydia's partner—as the Brain of the Lady of the Sword?" Anna pronounced gravely. "Neither appearances nor caprice gained him his place at her side; rather, he earned it by his own merit. The entire House of Leinster is aware that you have been working hard, young master...but it's not enough. You must apply yourself even more diligently."

"I will," I promised after a moment of stunned silence. There was no denying that I needed to work harder.

By the way...my legs have gone numb. Is there any chance you'll let me off the hook now? What? You won't? Ah. Yes, ma'am! You don't have to tell me twice, Ms. Anna!

*

Lydia easily avoided a hail of the elementary water spell Divine Water Shot from above as she closed in on me with incredible speed. I activated the elementary lightning spell Divine Lightning Shot on a delay in the direction she dodged, but she saw through my trap. Even varying the activation time and velocity of each individual shot made no difference; she was picking up speed as she cleaved her way through dozens of spells.

I could hardly believe it—she was even stronger than she had been during our last bout half a year before. Had she revisited her own training while she had been educating Lynne? I supposed that was just the sort of thing she would do, but the thought did nothing to stop my cold sweat.

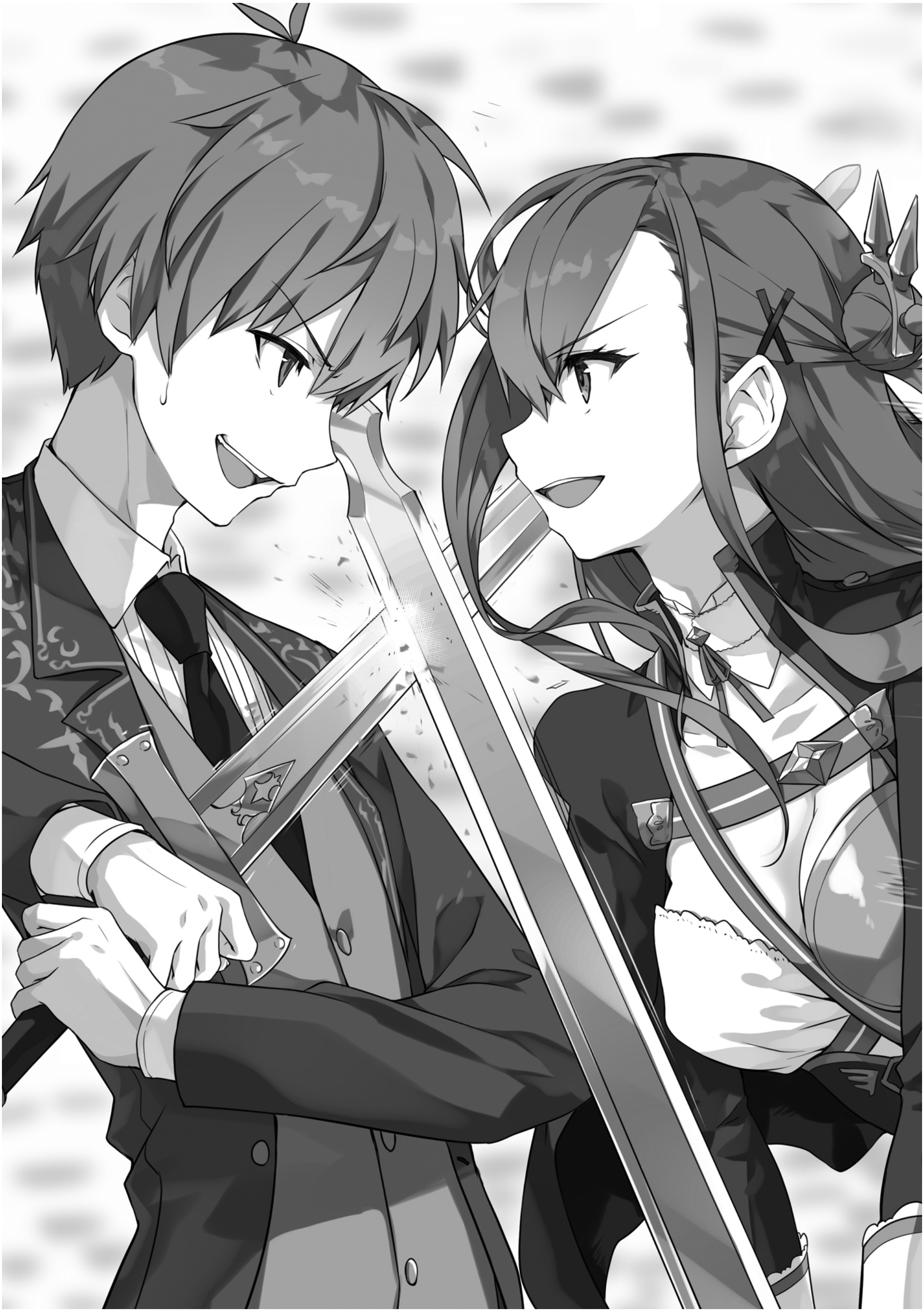
I attempted to slow her down using the elementary earth spell Divine Earth Chains, but she sliced through more than a few of my spell formulae before they even had a chance to activate. What was I to do? She was pushing me hard enough already.

As I wove my next spells, I reluctantly steeled myself to clash swords with the willful noblewoman. The next thing I knew, she was charging me head-on.

"I think you might have gotten a little *too* strong," I protested after blocking one of her strikes. "I-I'd like to request a handicap."

"Oh really?" Lydia responded. "You seem so confident, though. I bet you wouldn't mind if I got serious."

"No thank you. I long for kindness!"



I pushed back her sword and then made an immediate and calculated retreat, deploying weak examples of the elementary wind spell Divine Wind Wave in the resulting space between us. I was about to attempt to disengage her posthaste when...I stopped in my tracks. If this gambit played out as I expected, it wouldn't do to have an audience. I wouldn't like it much either.

"What's wrong?" Lydia asked, putting some distance between us while shooting me a questioning look.

"Oh, well, um..." I stammered. It wasn't an easy question to answer. It was probably none of my business, for one thing. I couldn't stop my eyes from darting from the spectator seats to Lydia's skirt, and it was then that she started to exude unmistakable bloodlust.

"I see you've got a death wish," Lydia said after a tense silence. "All right. I wouldn't mind slicing you up."

"Wh-Why is that your response?! I-I mean, a skirt that short is —"

"Don't try to argue."

"Be reasonable!"

Lydia charged in before I had time to deploy my spells. Metal clanged against metal as I weathered her onslaught with difficulty. My sword was making some unnerving sounds.

Downward slash, upward slash, horizontal sweep, diagonal slice, intense thrust. She finished with a blindingly fast string of eight thrusts and two perpendicular slashes before repeating the sequence in a different order. It was a merciless recapitulation of basic techniques. Did she want to drag me into the world of swordsmanship that badly? She was even making a show of whistling as she struck.

Don't pick on me just because you're running out of people to spar with. H-Hang on. Are *those rapid thrusts and perpendicular slashes basic techniques? I don't remember seeing many swordsmen use them in real combat!*

I stopped a horizontal sweep, parried the backhanded thrust she shifted it into, and blocked a downward slice, but her onslaught was far from over. The thousands—maybe tens of thousands—of her strikes I had taken over the past four years had taught me that I wasn't cut out to be a swordsman, and this assault was a keen reminder. I might manage to become better than average, but I would never be a true master. Before Lydia had learned to cast spells, she had believed in nothing but her sword. My improvised swordplay would never be a match for her dedication.

Weathering Lydia's onslaught was simple—she was only aiming at one spot, and it was easy to defend. In other words, she was holding back as much as she knew how! There could be no other explanation for how I was still standing in a fight at such close range, especially with my ability to deploy spells partially restricted.

That said, even I had my pride. I didn't plan to let it end like this. Besides which, my sword was nearing its limit—it was sturdily made, but Lydia's blows were too fast for me to properly deflect. I would need to buy myself a little time to prepare a counterattack!

I fended off another of Lydia's slashes and restrained her sword with the elementary darkness spell Divine Darkness Threads. It would have bought me time against most swordsmen...but my opponent wasn't like most swordsmen. The spell was tough to cut through, but it wouldn't last more than a few seconds against Lydia.

I leapt backward as I readied my next spell.

"You use these crafty tricks every time!" Lydia snapped as she easily sliced through my threads.

"Thank you for the compliment!" I quipped back as I unleashed a wild volley of Divine Light Shot, the fastest of all elementary spells. It was impossible to even react to it within a certain distance, and while unlikely to inflict a fatal blow, it was quite capable of stopping an opponent in their tracks. Against the Lady of the Sword, however...

"Too slow! You'll never even touch me with spells like that!" she shouted.

"That was your cue to get pinned down and wail that swordplay is a thing of the past!" I complained.

"Ha! In your dreams! Did you seriously think the same spell would work on me twice?"

Blocking or evading my spells would have been one thing, but she had deliberately taken them on the blade of her sword and played at returning fire with the ricochets. She even had the time to accelerate them with her own power. The reflected shots were too fast for me to dismantle, so I canceled them out with identical spells, burning through my mana.

Lydia must have gone overboard working out ways to counter this tactic just because I had quickly pinned her down with it during our match the year before. Was she an eager student or a sore loser? Either way, I wanted to stress that there was no need to go that far. I racked my brain about canceling out and deploying spells, but it was no use—I couldn't handle her using elementary spells. I couldn't cast anything beyond intermediate spells, and that meant I stood no chance of winning—not that I had ever expected to. Still, she would get annoyed at me if I lost on purpose.

"Come on!" Lydia goaded me. "Show me what you're made of! That can't be all you've got!"

"I know someone who'd be angry if it were. May I stop now?"

"How rude. I wouldn't be angry. I'd just use the story to tease you for a while."

What to do? I was in desperate straits. I knew that she didn't mean any harm, but she was still Lydia Leinster. If I wasn't careful, there was a good chance I would be crying myself to sleep for the next several months. I felt a desire to sympathize with herbivores driven to the brink by their predators. I might not be able to win, but I would have to find some way of minimizing my disadvantage to give myself room to negotiate.

Lydia finished swatting away my Divine Light Shots and began to charge me for the umpteenth time. I'd hoped to make my preparations carefully, but I would have to do the best I could under the circumstances.

I stopped deploying spells and closed in on Lydia. The flash of surprise on her face quickly changed into a charming smile—she was enjoying this too much!

The distance between us closed rapidly, and our swords clashed in the center of the maneuvering ground. The impact of our escaping mana filled the air with dust, and the weight of her strike made me grunt with exertion.

Lydia giggled. "I'll commend you for deciding to settle this head-on," she crowed.

"G-Give me a moment..." I groaned.

"No," she chirped, putting even greater strength behind her blade.

Y-You do *remember that we're only sparring here, right? And that you're using a real sword? If you cut me with that, it really is going to hurt. I know better than anyone that you're too skilled to let that* *happen, but still... Now, how would you like a surprise?*

I brought my left hand to the blade of my sword and slid the spell I had been weaving along it. Lydia's eyes widened as a thin layer of magical ice coated the weapon, dyeing it azure.

Good. It worked.

"Well now," Lydia remarked, "is this a souvenir from the Howards? It's an interesting spell formula."

"I was fortunate enough to witness the Azure Fists," I explained, "so I took a crack at reconstructing it."

"Oh really? I hope you don't think it will be enough to beat me."

Lydia's enchanted sword glowed, shattering the ice on mine, but I had anticipated that. Dozens of icy vines materialized from my blade to assault her. She quickly retreated, clicking her tongue in vexation, but the vines followed her. I waved my left hand and fired off a wild barrage of Divine Light Shots, Divine Lightning Shots made to resemble them, and Divine Wind Waves, which were difficult to see and covered a wide area.

I felt relieved as the gap between us widened. I had managed to regain my footing. The only problem was that victory still seemed unattainable. I didn't want to think about what would happen if my mana ran out.

Now that I had actually tried this technique—which I had decided to call the "Azure Sword" in imitation of the Howards' Azure Fists and the Leinsters' Scarlet Sword, although its power and substance were a far cry from either—I realized that it guzzled mana. But without it, I had no way of bringing the match to a draw.

I was keeping Lydia at bay with countless vines and elementary spells, but she seemed to have adjusted to my new tactics. She was standing stock-still and striking them all down without even trying to dodge. She was fast, and her slashes even seemed to be slightly sharper than before. Her cheerful mood had also done an about-face; now, she seemed discontent.

"Um, Lydia?" I asked timidly, halting my barrage of spells.

"What, you faithless ingrate?!" she snapped back.

"Why are you so upset?"

"I'm not upset. Do you need your eyes checked?"

"No, you're upset all right."

"Don't make me repeat myself."

"What choice do I have?" I protested. "You know I can't attempt your family's art in public."

"I told you, I am *not* upset," she insisted. After a brief pause, she asked, "If you can use it, why don't you?"

"I thought it would be a bad idea to unveil an imitation of a ducal house's secret art in a place like this without permission."

"You're using the Howards' though," she pointed out. "So *why* won't you use mine?!"

"Oh, well... Y-You see..." I stammered.

The Scarlet Sword was a secret art wielded by the direct lineage of the Ducal House of Leinster. Alongside Firebird, it was their trump card and the symbol of their martial prowess. I believed that it shared its origin with the Azure Fists but that both techniques had been refined independently. As someone who had observed both, it was my opinion that the Scarlet Sword focused on offense, while the Azure Fists combined offense and defense. I was certain that the Azure Fists Duke Walter had employed during Tina and Ellie's final exam had been merely a taste, far from what he was really capable of.

For better or worse, Lydia had trained me in the Scarlet Sword herself, and I had mastered at least the form of the technique—with Duke Leinster and Lisa's permission, that is. If we had been sparring without an audience, I would have opted for my more practiced Scarlet Sword. Or maybe not—I couldn't imagine fire having any effect on my current opponent.

My Azure Sword was a work in progress, but it also had the advantage of novelty. It was the better choice. But the glare of the sulky girl in front of me made it clear that logic was beside the point. Still, she was ordinarily a bit more reasonable in public. Perhaps this was her pent-up frustration showing—my failing the court sorcerer exam and taking a job as a private tutor had combined to keep us apart for more than three months. It was the first time we had been apart for so long since our meeting four years prior. Then again, we had been seeing each other every day recently. How selfish could she be?!

I moved my sword to a horizontal position and ran my hand along the blade again. As the sword shifted from azure to scarlet, it glowed and immediately radiated heat.

"You should have done that in the first place," Lydia said. "Inconsiderate servants are such a handful."

"This is *going* to cause problems," I replied, "so I hope you'll apologize along with me. Please?"

"If you beat me."

"Have I ever beaten you?"

"Of course not. How could you ever get the better of me in a sword fight?"

Lydia relaxed her stance. Her right hand, holding her favorite sword, hung loosely as the tension left her body. This was the Lady of the Sword's real battle stance—it appeared that she was done practicing.

We faced each other in silence. The spectators seemed to be holding their breath as well. There were also more of them than before.

"Get ready," Lydia told me.

"I am. Let's begin."

We nodded to each other and then abruptly accelerated. Seconds later, the gap between us was gone, and our sword strokes crossed. Sparks flew and dust swirled. I grunted with exertion as Lydia stepped forward with a piercing cry. She was going to overpower me!

Sorry. Still, this is *a competition.*

My blade turned back to azure and sprouted vines of ice that bound Lydia's enchanted sword. Her eyes widened. "You tricked me!" she shouted. "You coward! Have you no shame?!"

"Will you be able to say that once you've lost?" I asked. "I intend to win!"

I waved my left hand and cast Divine Earth Chains on the ground beneath Lydia's feet, causing stone chains to coil around her legs. Now if I could only cast Divine Light Shot at point-blank range...

I've won. I know it's just a game, but after four grueling years, I've finally won!

I was overconfident. The next thing I knew, Lydia had let go of her sword, seized me by the collar, and tossed me with a shout. My body spun through the air before being slammed into the ground. The impact scattered the spells that I had been preparing. It was all I could do to hastily brace myself against the fall—and it still hurt. I felt the edge of a sword against the nape of my neck.

"Ow. All right. You win," I conceded, raising both hands and forcing a smile. "I lost again."

"You need to train harder if a little move like that is all it takes to make you throw in the towel!” the willful noblewoman announced dispassionately. It sounded as though she still wanted more.

Honestly, even just playing along with her meant putting my life on the line. Her magic was impressive, but she was still a swordswoman, and her swordplay made her spells look trivial in comparison. I had limited her direction of attack, startled her with an unfamiliar technique, and launched a surprise attack, but this was still the result. She was incredible.

I stood up, dusted myself off, and picked up the knight’s sword.

Oh. I knew it.

“That’s all for now,” I told her. “Just look at this sword; it’s missing a huge chunk here. Oh, and here. And another one here. I can’t believe you did this to the royal guard’s equipment. Then again, I suppose you’ve smashed more important things than that—what’s the point of grinding the knights’ and court sorcerers’ pride and confidence to dust on their first day?”

“I held back as much as I possibly could, and it still ended up a wreck,” Lydia scoffed. “You weren’t blocking properly. You need to train harder!”

“Be reasonable,” I pleaded. “I really tried, you know? I think I deserve a compliment.”

“Well, I don’t. Hurry up and get good enough to make me use my Scarlet Sword seriously!”

T-Trying to block that would be suicide. If I had that kind of talent, I would have applied to join the royal guard.

Naturally, Lydia’s sword was completely unscathed despite the at least several hundred spells I had hammered it with.

I-I won’t let it get to me. Only freaks—ahem*, masters like “the Swordmaster,” the commander of the royal guard, or the Hero are capable of stopping her swordplay head-on.*

Unlike them, I was an ordinary person, and I would insist that I had put up a good fight. I wondered whether Lydia would keep going. Once she got started, she refused to stop until she was satisfied.

Lydia took something silver out of one of her pockets. It was the pocket watch I had given her. She checked the time and then snapped it shut.

What for...?

“I guess I have no choice,” she said. “I’ll let you off with that.”

"Thank you. I didn't realize you bring that watch to work with you."

Lydia suddenly looked flustered. "Wh-Why shouldn't I?" she asked defensively. "Y-You gave it to me, so it's mine! I can do with it as I please!"

"I'm glad to see you've found some use for it," I assured her. "But did it always have that crest on the lid? I thought it had only letters and numbers."

"C-Come on!" Lydia shouted to cover her embarrassment, although her face was bright red. "We're all done here! Clean up!"

That was why I'd told her not to swing her sword around like that. Did she realize how tired I was after casting that many elementary spells in a row? My spellcasting was far more efficient than it used to be, so I hadn't exhausted my mana supply, but I still didn't have enough to...

I lost my train of thought as I surveyed the arena.

Oh, all right. I'll fill in the holes and cracks.

I cast multiple earth spells and set about repairing the maneuvering ground, which looked as though it had been through the horrors of war.

"Unbelievable," Lydia muttered—she was now standing beside me. "All that control and nothing else."

"How so?" I asked. "You could do the same thing."

"It's tedious. Trifles like that are your responsibility."

I had no response, but I wished she hadn't said it with a smile.

Oh, I realized, *this would make an excellent learning opportunity for the girls.*

"Hurry up and fix it already," Lydia said. "I'm sure you were just thinking that this would make a good learning opportunity, weren't you? Most people would call that bullying."

"And who was bullying me in front of a live audience just now?" I mused.

"Excuse me? You should be shedding tears of gratitude for the privilege of fighting me."

"Yes, yes. Richard!"

I looked for the traitor who had abandoned me and soon found him...kneeling on the ground? Anna was beside him with a smile on her face. I decided against getting involved. That was Anna at her strictest—a harsh taskmaster feared by all the Leinster servants.

Don't give me that look, Richard. You sold me out, remember?

“A-Allen,” he pleaded. “H-Help me—”

“Would you mind if I healed the injured?” I asked him.

“Suit yourself, b-but don’t ignore—”

“Thank you. Goodbye.”

I thought that I heard a scream from behind me, but I must have imagined it. Indeed, I couldn’t hear a thing. Besides, Richard ought to consider himself fortunate that he didn’t have Lydia and Lisa to deal with. Or did that mean his true ordeal was yet to come? I prayed that he would be strong.

I began dispensing first-aid healing spells to the knights of the royal guard and court sorcerers lying along the walls. My sparring match with Lydia must have prevented aid from reaching them. I signaled with my hands to the knights and sorcerers standing by outside that it was safe to approach.

A lot of eyes seemed to be on me. I wondered why. I supposed I had stood out a bit—Lisa and Duke Leinster might scold me for that—but I couldn’t recall doing anything to merit such interest. Perhaps they pitied me? They were right to, if so—I certainly had it rough.

I completed my repairs to the maneuvering ground and stretched my stiff shoulders. I was exhausted. Meanwhile, Lydia sheathed her sword with an impressive sound. I thought that was cool, although I wouldn’t tell her so—I’d once put her in a bad mood for several days by doing that.

“Whew. I’m exhausted,” I said. “Oh, just look at the state of these nice clothes. There’s nowhere near enough in my wallet to reimburse you for these.”

“How many times do I have to tell you?” Lydia shot back. “I know you love your parents, but you need to stop sending them so much that you have barely anything left for yourself.”

I forced a laugh. “I’m sorry.”

Lydia paused to consider my apology. “Are you really?” she asked, staring intently at me as she closed the distance between us. The next thing I knew, she had seized me by the chest and pulled me toward her.

Hasn’t she ever heard of personal space?

“You reek of sweat,” she pronounced.

“Wh-What a thing to say!” I stammered. “I can’t control my physiological responses!”

“I’m not sweating. Would you, um...like to check?”

“Lydia,” I said after an awkward pause, “I don’t think you should make the offer if you can’t stand the embarrassment.”

“Th-That’s enough out of you! A-Anyway, it’s time for lunch.” She fell silent for a moment and then added, “I got what I wanted, anyway.”

Having spectacularly hoisted herself with her own petard, Lydia offered me her right hand. I was still pondering the meaning of her last statement when she seized my hand with evident impatience.

H-Hang on. I’m still all sweaty and—

“Disgusting. You’re all clammy.”

“R-Remember what I told you yesterday,” I reminded her. “Caren will be eating with us today. Do you mind?”

“Not in the least,” she said. “Later on, teach me how to disguise an enchanted sword like you did just now. You’re always thinking up underhanded tricks like that!”

“I exercise my ingenuity,” I corrected her. “I don’t mind teaching you, but I doubt you’ll need it.”

“Because fire spells are the only advanced magic I can cast properly?” she asked after a moment of silence.

“No,” I assured her with a grin, “because you should focus on slicing things up. Everything else is my job.”

Lydia gave a slight nod. She fought in the vanguard while I supported her from the rear. That was how we had always dealt with things, and I saw no reason to change it. I was relieved that she seemed to agree. Of course, I would still teach her later.

We were just about to join Richard and Anna when a dark shadow raced up and leapt nimbly at me. I felt a weight on my shoulder. It was Anko, the black cat familiar.

Of course. I should have known he would be here.

The current ministers were forced to invite the former leader of the court sorcerers and His Majesty’s own instructor in magic, no matter how much they might have preferred not to. I remembered how the man in question used to have a mean-spirited laugh about it every year.

“You certainly took your time getting here, considering that one of your students was in danger,” I called to the man in the top row of the spectator seats as I stroked Anko with one hand. “You do realize that it wouldn’t kill you to make an effort, right, Professor?”

*

The gentleman in formal attire descended from the spectator seats with a broad grin. Nearby onlookers rose to their feet and bowed their heads to him as he passed. He was none other than the head of the department that Lydia and I had belonged to at the Royal University—one of the kingdom's most accomplished sorcerers, commonly known as "the professor." He had also engineered the reason why I was staying on in my position as Tina and Ellie's tutor.

Now, what was his real name, again?

I was sure that he had quite a long name, coming as he did from a venerable and distinguished lineage, but no one ever called him by it, so it had completely slipped my mind.

The professor laughed. "I would never be so boorish, Allen. Perish the thought," he said.

"What do you want? Do I need to slice you up?" I asked him after a pause, menacing him with the point of my sword. He wasn't a bad person, but he did have a bad habit of throwing the game board into chaos, so this was the reception he deserved. The albatross was weaving a Firebird as I spoke.

"S-Since when is that *your* line?! The nerve of you!" he protested before turning to the girl beside me. "Hello, Lydia. My sincere congratulations on your appointment as a court sorceress. I see you really cut loose."

"It was self-defense, Professor," she said. "They started it. Won't you testify to that?"

"Yes," he agreed. "I saw the whole thing, and no one could lay the blame at your feet. After all, those oafs went so far as to call Allen a—"

"One more word and I'll incinerate you, slice you up, and then incinerate you again," Lydia said, gripping the hilt of her sword and preparing to charge. She had a Firebird ready to cast without warning, and she kept sneaking quick glances at me. It was easy to guess what she was thinking.

I gave her a gentle tap on the head. She immediately glared at me, but her embarrassment seemed stronger than her anger.

"Don't provoke her," I told the professor. "Of course, if you're willing to face her, I won't object."

"I don't plan on ending up in a coffin just yet," he replied. "A gentleman was just expressing an interest in meeting the two of you, and knowing what you're like, I was sure that you would skip off, hand in hand, the moment you were done. Now, it looks like your debut is over, so give me a moment of your time."

"Don't tease her either," I pleaded. "Didn't you just say that you value your life? And what do you mean, 'debut'?"

"It's nothing," Lydia said after a moment of silence. "Very well, then. It's not like we'd actually be going anywhere hand in hand...would we?"

I gave her another little tap on the head with one hand while scratching my cheek with the other. I wished she wouldn't play right into the professor's hands like that.

"The next time you tease us, I'll hold a student tribunal," I told him. "If you confess all your wicked deeds now, I'll reduce the interest—but only by a little."

"I-It would be less unnerving if you named a specific figure," the professor said. "But really, I never get bored of watching you; I just can't help myself. There's never so much as a wicked thought in my mind, but... Here he is now."

The professor indicated the new arrival with a hand gesture and immediately sank into a deep bow. I was wondering whom in the kingdom he would show such deference when out of the corridor above the spectator seats stepped—

I immediately dropped to one knee and lowered my head. Anko likewise left my shoulder and sat beside me.

Oh no! I knew he'd get us mixed up in trouble! I should have taken Lydia and left when I had the chance!

The albatross seemed to share my opinion, because she was muttering beside me. "When this is over, I'll slice him up, incinerate him, and then slice him up again..." I couldn't agree more.

Multiple sets of footsteps approached us.

"You may all raise your heads."

A deep voice filled the maneuvering ground. In the entrance stood a large, imposing man clad in dazzling white, with a muscular physique and a golden crown atop his blond head. It was His Majesty, the king. He was followed by another large man, whose platinum hair was faintly tinged with blue—His Highness, Duke Walter Howard—and a slender man with curly red hair whose placid demeanor betrayed glimpses of his inner severity—His Highness, Duke Liam Leinster. Both were giving us worried looks.

"Lydia, Allen, it's been a long time. I see that you've been diverting yourselves quite entertainingly; why was I not invited?"

"Your Majesty," was all Lydia had to say in response.

I kept silent, deciding it best to let her handle this. I had met His Majesty unofficially on several occasions, but it still wouldn't do for a commoner such as myself to answer him directly in front of such a large gathering—it might cause trouble for the two dukes. Besides which, His Majesty had not specifically asked *why* Lydia had gone on a rampage. Silence was golden.

Ow! Lydia, don't pinch my back like that. Don't worry. You can overcome this. D-Don't push! This really isn't the place!

Stifled laughter interrupted our argument.

"Enough. You may answer directly," His Majesty declared. "Lydia."

"Yes, Your Majesty?"

"I won't fault the young for pushing each other to reach new heights. That said, this is the day of the investiture ceremony for new knights of the royal guard and court sorcerers—the future swords and shields of my kingdom. It is an occasion for celebration. I trust that you have a good reason for following that ceremony with such strife?"

"I would prefer not to state it here," Lydia answered clearly.

"Oh? And why not?"

"I trust that Your Majesty need not ask."

So, *he* was involved. That explained a lot, including the spectators.

Lydia appeared dignified at first glance, but I could see that her right hand was trembling very slightly. I gave it a gentle squeeze.

All right. If you don't want to say any more, I'll take over. I am a man, after all.

"Your Majesty, if I may?" I said clearly, raising my head.

A stir went through the onlookers and several foulmouthed jeers flew my way. I heard curiosity and contempt—the crowd seemed to be aware of my origins, and it sounded as though that man and his hangers-on were in attendance. Thankfully, the two dukes silenced the hecklers by clearing their throats.

"You may," His Majesty loudly declared. He sounded amused.

I felt Lydia squeeze my left hand.

Don't worry.

"Thank you, Your Majesty. Her Highness, Lady Lydia Leinster, renowned as the Lady of the Sword, would never draw her weapon without cause. Having spent the past four years at her side, I know that better than anyone. Your Majesty, Lady Lydia has said that she would prefer not to state her reasons here—I humbly request that you trust her judgment. If I may reiterate, Lady Lydia is kind. She would never draw her sword—or even wield a sharp word—without ample justification."

"Very well. Liam, Walter."

"Your Majesty!" both dukes answered in unison.

"Report the details to me later. Even if they concern the royal family."

Both dukes silently nodded their assent.

Thank goodness. Now we can—

A tall young man in the uniform of the royal guard sprinted out of the stands and across the maneuvering ground before coming to a stop before His Majesty. I supposed that his hangers-on were watching from a distance.

"Why, father?" he demanded, his face flushed with rage. "Why do you not punish this insolent woman?! Not only has she persistently refused my offers of marriage; she has taken offense at the concerns of my friends, who out of the goodness of their hearts warned her against that man's birth and the lowly beastfolk he calls family! And for no more reason than this, she disturbed the peace on this day of celebration! The victims of her outrages merely spoke the truth!"

The young man then turned his fury on me. "And you, base peasant! Do you honestly believe that you can speak directly to my father and get away with it?! Know your place! You're nothing but a loser who wasn't good enough for the court sorcerers!"

"Gerard." His Majesty interrupted the torrent of abuse.

The furious young man was His Majesty's second son and second in line to the throne, Prince Gerard Wainwright. The prince was twenty-three years old, two years younger than Richard. Like Richard, he served in the royal guard, of which he was eighth in command. He must have been extremely agitated—his blond hair, of which he was quite proud, was in disarray, his handsome features were hideously contorted, and he was gesticulating wildly. It had been quite some time since he had made such a show of stabbing himself in the foot.

The prince had been my opponent in the practical portion of the court sorcerer exam and the reason for my failure—an incident that I had heard required considerable effort to cover up. Besides which, who was he to call me a “loser” when he had lost that fight? Of course, if his main goal had been to ensure that I failed the exam, then he had indeed achieved a total victory.

As a strained silence settled over the maneuvering ground, I shot a sidelong glance at Lydia and found her gripped by a mixture of embarrassment and rage. Her beautiful profile was flushed all the way to the nape of her neck, but she was also squeezing my hand painfully tight.

She had been so reckless. Did she realize that she could have been forced to resign from the court sorcerers on the spot? I would have to get mad at her later—not that I wasn’t glad she had done it.

“Have you nothing to say for yourself?!” Prince Gerard shrieked. “You were raised by beastfolk, and that makes you half subhuman yourself. The likes of you has no place at the side of a daughter of the House of Leinster, a distant relative of my own family. It is impermissible. Do you realize that Lydia is unable to so much as find a fiancé because of you? Your animal stink has rubbed off on her. I have nevertheless graciously offered to accept her on numerous occasions, but the woman refuses to listen to reason. You must convince her to accept as punishment for your past impudence. Do so, and I shall show some slight favor even to you brutes who crawl in the dirt with the beasts, and—”

“You should not have said that.” After letting go of Lydia’s hand, I closed the distance between the prince and me, seized him by the collar, and lifted him off his feet, strangling him in the process. A commotion filled the stands, accompanied by angry shouts, jeers, and insults.

The prince grunted and spluttered. “Wh-What is the meaning of... I-I can’t breathe...”

He never learned. He ought to have known that I wasn’t mature enough to ignore such things. What would become of me later? I didn’t care.

I slowly explained my feelings to His Majesty. “As you say, there is a great difference in social standing between Her Highness and me. If my presence will have a negative effect on Lady Lydia’s future...then I will never see her again. I made up my mind about that the first time we met. I swear it by my parents and the Great Tree in my homeland.”

Lydia gasped behind me. I could sense a shudder run through her, but I meant what I said. I had steeled my resolve for that a long time ago.

“But I cannot overlook your other remarks,” I continued. “I have resigned myself to accept personal insults, but insinuating that Her Highness has an ‘animal stink’? Or that my family members ‘crawl in the dirt’? You may be royalty—no, *because* you’re royalty, you should not make such brainless remarks. Now, my response depends on yours. May I take it that your ideas represent the opinion of the royal family?”

The prince groaned. “It hurts... H-Help me...”

His Majesty let out a long, long sigh. He suddenly looked exhausted. “Allen,” he said a moment later.

No. I haven’t heard your answer yet, I thought as I pulled the prince’s collar tighter. The blue in his face was a sign of oxygen deprivation.

“The royal family is with its people,” His Majesty said. “Naturally, that includes beastfolk. One day, should it prove necessary, I shall lead my troops in person and defend my subjects even at the cost of my own life—that is my duty as king. In my name, I retract the slights against Lydia Leinster and against your parents.” He paused for a beat. “Now, stand down.”

I let go of the prince, who collapsed to the ground with a thud, breathing heavily. I dropped to one knee and bowed my head low.

“I sincerely apologize for my indiscretion,” I said. “While I realize that my humble head is little recompense, I beg that you will pardon Her Highness, my family, and the wolf clan.”

“Don’t be absurd,” His Majesty scoffed. “It’s clear as day who deserves punishment. At bottom, it was my lax judgment that brought on this affair. Your court sorcerer examination was—”

“Your Majesty,” the professor interrupted, “you needn’t bring that up again.” I didn’t like the look on his face. He was trying to put me in his debt because he knew that I hadn’t told Lydia the truth. And to be frank, I was grateful for it.

Thank you very much. That was a close one!

My heart was racing, and the whole ordeal had taken years off my life, but I was safe for the time being. I could never tell Caren or the girls about this—I had no doubt they would take me to task for it.

Prince Gerard finally steadied his breathing and looked at me. There was fury and madness in his eyes. Without warning, he threw himself in front of Lydia, his hand on the hilt of his sword.

“And what do you think you’re doing?” Richard, who had been receiving a lecture from Anna the last time I had seen him, seized the prince’s hand.

“U-Unhand me!” the prince bellowed in consternation. “That’s an order!”

“An order?” Richard repeated.

“Yes! I’m a prince! It’s your duty to obey me! All royal subjects live to serve me, their potential future king. The House of Leinster is no exception!”

The prince’s words hung in the air for a moment.

“Gerard,” Richard said, “you’re a knight of the royal guard, and I’m a vice commander and second in command. And in the royal guard...”

The prince spluttered as Richard forced him onto his hands and knees in the dirt, restraining him. The spectator seats produced hesitant protests and a roar of applause. His Majesty grimaced, apparently unpleasantly surprised by his son’s unpopularity.

“We don’t allow weak knights like you. We also have penalties for anyone who looks down on the people they’re sworn to protect or gets too carried away by their social standing. I’m sentencing you to two weeks’ suspension from duty. That’s the official verdict of Richard Leinster, vice commander of the knights of the royal guard. You’re welcome to talk it over with the commander if you want to overturn it, but I’m pretty sure he’ll just kill you. Does Your Majesty have any objections?”

“What?!” the prince exclaimed. “Th-That’s absurd! You’ll never get away with—”

“Two weeks isn’t long enough,” His Majesty answered, ignoring the prince. “Make it one month. He is henceforth forbidden from making contact with Lydia Leinster or Allen, and if he breaches the peace during his suspension, strip him of his title as a knight of the royal guard.”

“Father?!”

“You’re an absolute fool! Knights, apprehend this imbecile!”

At His Majesty’s command, the knights of the royal guard who had been watching from outside the walls of the maneuvering ground moved to restrain the prince.

“Please wait, Your Majesty.” A shrill, nervous voice cut in, making the professor frown. A man in his prime wearing a sorcerer’s robe and carrying a thick tome emerged from the corridor. The monocle over his left eye and his long white beard attracted attention.

Lord Gerhard Gardner, the current leader of the court sorcerers, was a model conservative and champion of the nobility. As a second son, he had been unable to inherit the title of marquess, but he was nevertheless a stickler for bloodlines and critical of meritocracy. He also figured in numerous dark rumors.

“Let it not be forgotten that Lydia Leinster caused a disturbance,” he advised His Majesty in an emotionless voice. “She is now a court sorceress and must be held accountable. In addition, that commoner insolently presumed to harm the prince’s person. Punishment must be impartial if it is to set a good example.”

His Majesty appeared to consider that for a moment. “In that case, Lydia will also receive a month’s suspension. Liam?”

“I have no objections. It may do my daughter good,” Duke Leinster replied.

“Allen is henceforth barred from the royal palace except by special permission,” His Majesty continued. “I want you all to remember that I love my people, whether they be noble, common, beastfolk, or anyone else! It makes no difference to me. The royal family is with its people. Gerard, if you want to blame anyone, blame the father who never had time to teach you that. Take him away!”

“F-Father?” the prince stammered. “Father! Father! Fatheeer...!” His screams faded to nothing as knights of the royal guard marched him out of the maneuvering ground. It was no more than he deserved. Lydia was right—even breathing the same air as him was unpleasant. I hoped that I would never see him again.

His Majesty looked rueful. As for the two dukes... Duke Leinster was furious—hardly surprising, given how he doted on Lydia. Duke Walter beside him looked rather worried, an unfortunate outcome that I felt quite bad about. Lord Gardner was silent, but his cold stare was fixed on me. The professor was deep in thought; I hoped he wouldn’t get me mixed up in anything else.

A large, warm hand came to rest on my shoulder. I could hear teeth grinding nearby.

“I’m sorry to put you through so much yet again. I will make it up to you,” a voice whispered in my ear. “Visit my daughter once the uproar has subsided—she has been asking to see both of you.”

The hand was withdrawn, and the footsteps that had previously approached now began to depart. Another weight soon rested on my shoulder; this time, it was Anko.

It must be over, I thought as I stroked the familiar's soft back. *I'm exhausted—really exhausted. Actually, "worn down" is more accurate.*

I stood up, stretched, and then turned to the girl beside me, who hadn't spoken in some time. "Thank you, Lydia," I said.

"Really?" she responded after a long silence. Something was wrong.

"H-Hang on!" I stammered. "I was just... When it comes to us, I..."

She began to sob, and I started to panic in earnest. *Hang on. I-It's not what you think. I didn't mean it that way.*

"What do you think you're doing, Allen? You certainly have a knack for making young ladies cry," the professor cut in, never one to miss his chance to stir up trouble. "Now, I trust you know how to comfort her at a time like this, so get to it."

"Please don't mind us, Mr. Allen," Anna chimed in. How long had she been there?

"I feel conflicted about watching my little sister take another step on the road to adulthood," Richard added.

They were all unbelievable! Just because they thought it wasn't their problem, they treated it as entertainment. The spectators in the stands had even begun placing bets. Was I going to kiss her? I was not! That said, Lydia was clinging to the hem of my jacket and looking at me uneasily, so I *was* at least going to comfort her.

"It's all right," I told the teary-eyed noblewoman, stroking her head as gently as I could. "I'm right here, at your side." She must have been feeling overwhelmed—doing anything like this in public would normally earn me a merciless scolding.

"Liar," she said after a moment. "I know you meant it. I'll never let you run off like that."

"Oh dear. What can I do to earn your forgiveness?"

She paused again before answering. "Nothing. I won't forgive you, so never leave me."

"All right. I promise," I conceded, then relaxed with a sigh. "I was so nervous that I started sweating again."

"I can tell," she remarked. "You smell sweaty."

"D-Don't sniff me!"

Good grief... And this is only her first day. Not that I considered myself unfortunate; getting to meet my parents, Caren, Lydia, and the girls was more good luck than I had a right to hope for. Oh, maybe that explained things—I had used up my luck on meeting people, so...

A tug on my left hand cut my musings short.

"I bet you've got some weird idea in your head again," Lydia said. "Come on. Let's go."

"That's not very nice. You looked so much more charming when you were in tears just now."

"N-Not another word!" she stammered. "And I wasn't c-crying!"

"You most certainly were. Isn't that right, Anna?"

"If I may say so, this year's Best Video of Lady Lydia Award is mine!" the head maid replied.

"You heard her," I told Lydia. "That bodes well, don't you think?"

"Well...what else was I supposed to do?"

"Oh, well..." I fumbled for an answer. "I'm sorry."

Lydia being upfront with her feelings wasn't playing fair. If we hadn't been in public...

I checked the time on my pocket watch to mask my embarrassment and discovered that this mess had taken longer than I'd thought. The entrance ceremony was over, and we wouldn't even be in time for lunch. I would have to apologize to Caren.

"Yes, let's go," I said. "Everyone must be tired of waiting for us."

*

I didn't have it much easier after we got back to the Leinster mansion. Tina, Ellie, and Lynne were waiting anxiously for us—Anna, who had wasted no time in her return from the palace, had apparently filled their heads with who-knew-what. As a result, Tina and Lynne had been on me like a shot as soon as they got a look at my stained suit.

"Sir! What have you and Lady Lydia been up to without us?!"

"Dear brother and sister, how could you leave me out? I'm crushed."

Ellie's reaction had actually frightened me a little. Her smile had been almost intimidating when she said, "Please undress, sir; I'll launder your clothes. Don't dawdle." At that point, Lydia and Anna had joined in. They had all ganged up on me while I changed and…and…

I've been defiled. I'm unfit for marriage now. O God, you really don't like me, do you? And you must be a bully at heart. I'm terribly sorry, but I already have all the bullies I need right here.

"Stay here tonight," Lydia offered. "You can prepare for your tutoring job here, can't you?"

"I'd love to," I said, "but I have to escort Tina and Ellie home, and I think Caren is visiting my place."

The sun had set, and the moon was in the sky. The royal capital was a safe city, but I would still have to see the girls home. Tina and Ellie were already watching us from inside a Howard carriage waiting outside the massive front gate. Lynne, who had come to see them off, was taunting Tina.

Hey now. No spellcasting. Ellie, don't try to secretly join in.

The albatross was refusing to look at me. A lot had happened, and she had been suspended from duty, even if only for expediency's sake. She couldn't be happy about that.

"Lydia," I said.

"What?" she asked after a pause.

"Thank you for getting angry for me. And that sparring match this afternoon was to show off what I'm capable of, wasn't it? But then I had to go and…" I let my words trail off and then began again. "I'm sorry. I ended up tarnishing your record."

She took another moment to answer. "Don't be. I don't care about that."

"All right. What about those ruined clothes?" I asked.

"I-I picked them out, and I can do as I please with them!" she stammered. "And tomorrow?"

"I'll drop by." I brushed a hand against her hair and then began to walk down the marble passage toward the carriage. I wondered what she planned to do with the suit I had worn. It had gotten so dirty and torn that it couldn't be easy to mend.

Lisa had sounded quite pleased when she heard what had transpired at the palace.

"Well done. I'm proud of you," she had said. "Richard, kneel on the floor. Anna, fetch some stone slabs."

"Here, mistress," the head maid had replied. "Everything stands ready."

"My, that was quick. How many shall we start with?"

I'll never forget you, Richard. You even redeemed yourself at the *end.*

Duke Liam had been surprisingly appreciative as well. “I’m sorry to put you through such constant trouble,” he had said. “Look after my daughters.”

I would do my best, but...“daughters”?

The duke would apparently be returning to the south the next day. He planned to spend the evening drinking with Duke Walter, who would likewise be returning to the north, and their old friend the professor.

In any case, this had all been familiar territory—apart from speaking with His Majesty, at least. Calling on a certain esteemed personage, however, would presumably have to wait, given that I was now barred from the palace.

Caren would probably have a lecture waiting for me when I got back to my lodgings. I had broken my promise to eat lunch with her after the entrance ceremony, so I would have my hands full restoring her mood for the time being. I could imagine just what she would say: “Your treatment of your lovely little sister leaves much to be desired. Repent.” I would need to prepare myself.

Tina, Ellie, and Lynne in the morning, Lydia in the afternoon, and Caren at night? Ha ha. It’s not easy being so popular...

Okay, I’ll stop now. That hit a little too close to home.

The next day, I would call at the Leinster mansion and then meet with the professor to discuss the diary that the Howards had left in my keeping. It would probably end up in the headmaster’s hands—decryption was his area of expertise. I would also have to devise materials for the girls’ lessons. I might not be a court sorcerer, but my days were still filled with—

A gentle bump from behind interrupted my thoughts.

“Lydia?” I asked.

“Don’t turn around,” she said. “Just listen.” She was pressing her head against my back, staying relatively hidden from the girls.

"You're not allowed to leave me. All of that is over and done with; never do it again. It doesn't matter that my father's a duke and you're a commoner. If..." She hesitated. "If anyone tries to separate us, I'll renounce my family and leave the country with you. The city of water might be nice."

I was certain that she would have no difficulty making her way in another country, but I couldn't let her do that. Duchess Lisa and the rest of her family loved her and would be sad to see her go.

"Lydia."

I tried to look at her over my shoulder, but she held my head in place before I had a chance to turn it. I couldn't move an inch.

"Th-That hurts," I protested.

"I told you not to turn around," she responded after a beat. "As punishment, you have to..."

"What do I have to do?"

Her answer was barely audible.

"What?" I asked.

"Y-You heard me."

"H-Hey! No kicking!"

It took dexterity to kick someone in the calves and hold them still at the same time. I groaned. What was I to do with her?

"I heard you," I assured her. "I'll come to see you every day."

"You big idiot," she responded after a pause. "Thanks," she added in a voice so small it was practically a whisper.

I felt something wet on my back. I tried to turn around, but a loud cry interrupted me.

"S-Sir! What are you doing?!" Tina exclaimed.

"Uh, um," Ellie stammered, "I don't think this is the time or place for that sort of thing."

"Dear sister, you lucky devil..." Lynne added wistfully.

They had evidently seen through us. Ellie and Lynne were staring at me, while Tina was actually leaning out the window of the carriage and windmilling her arms wildly.

Lydia was slowly departing. Neither of us turned to look at the other—we knew better than anyone that we were connected. My nickname was "the Brain of the Lady of the Sword," after all, meaning that I was her partner.

It would all work out in the end; nothing could stand in our way as long as we tackled it together. Lydia hadn't really meant all that about fleeing the country. It was just a cliché...wasn't it?

"Sir!"

"Allen, sir!"

"Dear brother!"

Yes, yes. Oh, I almost forgot—I'll need to compliment the girls for all I'm worth.

I couldn't help but smile at my predicament. I'd had my hands full dealing with one willful noblewoman; now I wouldn't even have time to worry.

And so, I resumed walking toward the carriage in the moonlight, my heart full of warm feelings.

Chapter 3

"Now, be honest and confess. You haven't told me everything yet, have you?"

The voice belonged to a wolf-clan girl wearing the uniform of the Royal Academy—my younger sister Caren. I was seated in an old, wooden chair, while she was standing accusingly over me with her hands on her hips. The smile on her face was precious—I would have loved to record it to an orb—but her eyes were shifting from their usual dark brown to violet, and I could sense the powerful pulse of her mana.

"I've already heard that you'll be staying on as a private tutor, and about the incident with Lydia," she continued. "I can't say I'm surprised—I know how you are, and I can't fault you for it. That said..." Her eyes narrowed in an expression of intense suspicion; it looked like I might not be able to deceive her completely. "Why did the headmaster himself summon you today, the first real day of classes now that new student orientation is over? It's inexplicable. Simply, utterly inexplicable."

Four days had passed since the entrance ceremony, and that morning, I had received a summons to the Royal Academy. I had informed the Leinsters that I would call on them at lunchtime and set out for the academy at once, only to find my visibly disgruntled sister waiting for me at the front gate. She had marched me straight to the student council office whether I liked it or not. I had specifically asked the headmaster to keep my visit secret, but he never made things easy.

As planned, we had discussed Frigid Crane, Duchess Rosa, and the diary the day after the entrance ceremony. The headmaster had been reluctant at first, but after some coaxing, cajoling, and a threat —I mean, an *offer* to put the whole matter in the professor's hands, he must have realized the severity of the issue.

"All right, I'll cooperate," he had finally conceded. "But I want you to help me with something as well. I'll give you the details in a few days. It won't be a long-term commitment—the ducal houses of

Leinster and Howard have warned me about tying you down—but why should I be the only one to suffer— Oh, excuse me. Slip of the tongue."

Setting aside the rest of our conversation, that had been a worrying statement. What could involve not only Lisa and Duke Liam, but Duke Walter as well...?

Damn that twisted elf. He must have gone out of his way to tell Caren that he'd called for me. What did he have to leap straight to revenge for? He must have known that—

A point-blank view of Caren's face interrupted my thoughts. Her eyes were turning an even deeper shade of violet. "Are you listening to me?!" she asked, distinctly enunciating each word.

"I'm listening," I assured her. "It sounds like I've worried you. Sorry."

"I wouldn't say I've been worried," she demurred after a pause, making a show of crossing her arms and acting aloof. She wanted me to know she was angry.

We had planned to return home together during the spring break if I passed the court sorcerer exam. I hadn't had the opportunity for a proper talk with her for some time either, and I had even reneged on my promise to join her for lunch after the entrance ceremony. She must have been lonely. I wasn't much of a big brother to be causing her so much concern.

"Don't worry," I said. "I'm not in any danger...I think."

"You 'think'?" she repeated. "You're always, always like this! Spare a thought for how much you make me worry every time you—" She suddenly paused mid-sentence. "F-Forget I said that. I-I'm not worried about you. I-I mean it."

She looked adorable shaking her head in vehement denial; no one could argue with that. Her beret came loose and fell to the floor, revealing her silver-gray ears. I rose to pick it up, and as I did so, I noticed that it bore the silver insignia of a wing and staff that marked her as vice president of the student council. I couldn't help smiling at the badge, which was proof of all her hard work. I dusted off the beret and replaced it on her head.

"Honestly..." she grumbled, pursing her lips. "I already had enough on my plate dealing with Lydia, and now your students are at the academy, one placed highly and the other top of her class? And Lynne enrolled with them?!"

"It must be fate," I remarked. "They're wonderful students, and

I enjoy tutoring them. You know how capable Lynne is, and Tina and Ellie are extremely talented as well."

At that, Caren fell silent for a moment. "Wait a minute," she said.

I didn't hide my confusion. What had brought this on? Caren was frowning and pressing one hand to her forehead. Did she have a headache?

"What did you just say?" she finally asked.

"They're wonderful students," I repeated.

"After that."

"You know how capable Lynne is, and Tina and Ellie are—"

"There!" she exclaimed. "That's it!"

I was nonplussed. What was so odd about— Her rapidly converging mana interrupted my thoughts. Crackling flashes of violet lightning shot through the room.

"Why are you calling them by name?" she asked after a long silence. Her eyes were unfocused, and her voice was low. "Lydia, Lynne, and I are the only girls close to your age whom you address so casually. You always called those two 'Her Highness and her maid' in your letters." She paused again and then said, "Tell me, what's going on?"

This was not good. Caren could be intensely dependent on me in a different sense than Lydia, and she was especially sensitive to girls in my life. She wouldn't even introduce me to her friends in person.

Oh dear. Her eyes are violet and...her tail is standing on end? She might blow away the whole room if she casts a lightning spell of that magnitude in here.

"They're both my students, remember?" I explained, laying a hand on her beret-covered head. "Of course I call them by name."

"Is that all?" she asked after a tense pause.

"That's all," I assured her. "They might not throw tantrums like you do, though."

"I-I'm not throwing a tantrum!" she protested.

"Are you certain?"

"Qu-Quite certain!"

"Oh really?"

She gave a little gasp as I withdrew my hand. Her eyes cried out for affection, and her tail drooped limply. She was so needy, but also so indescribably charming that I couldn't help hugging her.

"A-Allen?!" she exclaimed. "I-It's not even dark yet. Is this really the time?"

"What?" I asked. "I was just thinking that I've got the cutest little sister in the whole world."

"I-In the whole world...?" she repeated. "Do you really mean that?"

Caren had been stiff with surprise, but she soon went limp in my arms. Her tail seemed in a good mood, and her eyes had returned to normal. *There, there.* I ensured that she received her fill of affection and then released her.

"That wasn't fair, Allen..." She looked up at me with flushed cheeks while clinging to my sleeves.

"Don't blame me for having such an adorable sister," I said.

"That's just what I mean!"

"Yes, yes."

"One 'yes' is enough!"

"Is that a fad of some sort?" I asked. "Lydia and Tina said it too."

"A-Anyway," she stammered, "stop seducing girls when Lydia and I aren't watching! It causes so much trouble!"

"I'd hardly call it 'seducing,'" I said. "You know that I've never been lucky in love."

"That's the one thing you're oblivious to," Caren muttered under her breath. "It's one of your few faults—or is it a virtue, since it benefits me? I certainly hope you keep it up."

"Did you say something?" I asked, confused.

Just then, the door flew open, and a girl rushed into the room.

"I'm sorry, Caren," she said. "My last class ran late. What did you want to— Huh?"

Her long, platinum hair tinged with pale blue was styled in a braid and adorned with a finely embroidered blue ribbon tied at the back of her head. She was slightly shorter than Caren, with a well-proportioned figure in which I could glimpse the beauty unique to an adult woman emerging from the chrysalis of childhood. Her beret bore a silver badge embossed with the wing-and-sword insignia that marked her as student council president. At her waist hung a slender sword and a short wand, both of exquisite workmanship.

I nodded to the girl, who goggled at me and then returned an enthusiastic bow that sent her beret flying. Her long, beautiful hair dazzled me.

I knew her name, but this was our first face-to-face meeting.

"I-I'm Stella Howard," she stammered. "M-Mr. Allen, I presume? I-I've heard so much to your credit, and you've done so much for my sister. Th-Thank you very much!"

"I ought to thank you," I said. "I've learned far more from Tina than she has from me. Oh, your beret." I picked it up, dusted it off, and handed it to her. "Here you are."

"Th-Thank you very much," she responded, a lock of her hair curling up as she blushed, just like someone else I knew.

"Please feel free to..." I began before stopping and correcting myself. "I suppose I ought to watch my manners. My humble apologies, Your Highness, Lady Stella Howard."

"I don't need that kind of deference!" she exclaimed. "Never call me 'Lady Howard'!" After a silence, she hesitantly added, "I'm, um, really no one special, so please don't. I mean it."

This girl, who seemed utterly earnest, was none other than Tina's older sister, the future Duchess Howard. I had heard that she had rebelled against Duke Walter and applied to the Royal Academy despite his objections. Looking at the nervous, mild-mannered girl in front of me, however, I found that difficult to believe. She was the picture of a well-bred young noblewoman.

"Stella." Caren addressed the student council president.

"C-C-Caren!" Lady Stella stammered, closing distance with my younger sister in a flash and shaking her by the shoulders. “Wh-Wh-What’s going on?! Wh-What is Mr. Allen doing here?! I wish you had warned me! I haven’t even done my makeup!”

Caren just allowed herself to be shaken; it appeared that they had forged a lovely friendship, although it struck me that Caren had never breathed a word of it to me.

“I mean...” my sister began to protest as she swayed.

“That’s no excuse!” Her Highness wailed.

“...I knew this would happen,” Caren finished. “Let me reintroduce you. This is my brother.”

Her Highness let out a wordless shriek and fell into despondency.

What an overreaction. She’s Tina’s sister, all right. Now, what’s this about?

“It’s just what it looks like,” Caren explained. “Stella idolizes you and Lydia, and as her friend, I couldn’t bring myself to shatter her dreams.”

“That makes sense,” I admitted after a moment. “Lydia is constantly threatening to slice people up, incinerate them, or both, while I’m... Well, just look at me.”

My sister was a caring friend, even if she could seem blunt at times. I was glad that she had grown up to be so kind.

“Besides,” she muttered, too quietly for me to hear, “I wouldn’t want to risk introducing a purehearted girl like Stella to you.”

I shot Caren a questioning look.

“Just talking to myself,” Caren said. “Stella, come back to us.” With a snapping sound, she struck her friend with a tiny jolt of violet electricity.

Her Highness let out a brief cry. “That hurt, Caren...” she mumbled.

“Allen, this is for you,” Caren said, ignoring Her Highness and handing me an envelope. Its front was blank, but opening it revealed a sheet of stationery inside.

“Did he say anything when he gave it to you?” I asked.

“‘I’m being watched. This doubles as a safeguard, just in case,’” Caren recited. “The headmaster explained things, although he kept me in the dark about the important parts.” She paused for me to respond. “Allen?” she asked when I didn’t.

“I told you; it’s nothing important,” I chided my sister, who was watching me with half-closed eyes, as I reread the paper.

It contained classified information. Prince Gerard showed no sign of repentance despite his suspension from duty. He had finally given up on Lydia only to shift his interest to...Lynne? And there was a significant chance that he would make a move during his suspension? The prince apparently failed to grasp the significance of his punishment. He just never learned.

The note continued:

"I'd like to take precautions, but I'm a busy man. That being the case, I want you to act as a temporary security guard-slash-instructor while I'm away from the academy. I'll need you for about one month, and only for one or two days each week. That's not much to ask, is it? Especially compared to the problem you foisted on me. I've already added you to the teaching schedule, so you have no choice but to accept. Heh heh heh... Think up some excuse to give the Leinster girl. You're free to determine the content of your lessons, but don't overdo it. That's important, so allow me to repeat it for emphasis: don't overdo it."

Perhaps he and the professor were on such bad terms because they were actually birds of a feather. Still, if that was how things stood, I really would have to— *Caren, don't try to circle around and peek over my shoulder.*

"Stingy..." she groused. "Are you going to accept the temporary teaching job?"

"I suppose," I said.

"Then I insist you agree to teach other lessons as well—especially the ones I attend."

"No."

"Don't you care about your sister?!" she demanded.

"What's this?" I responded, partly poking fun at her. "I thought my adorable little sister was a good girl who doesn't whine."

Her tail drooped. "You're so mean..."

"I've been told that a lot lately."

"You always have been," she told me and then turned back to Lady Stella, who had been watching our back-and-forth with evident enjoyment. "Stella."

"Huh? Wh-What is it?" Lady Stella asked.

"My brother will be teaching here temporarily, just for the next month, and only the most advanced group of new students," Caren explained with evident regret. "Would you show him the way? I have class. And, um..." She let her words trail off.

"What? Oh, of course. I don't mind," Lady Stella said. "And what else?”

“I’m sorry for not telling you,” Caren said hesitantly. “Will you forgive me?”

That must have been bothering her, although I doubted she had anything to worry about.

Lady Stella took both of Caren’s hands. “There’s nothing to forgive. I was surprised, but you thought I’d panic if you told me, didn’t you?” She giggled. “You were right about that, so don’t worry.”

“Thanks, Stella. I love you,” Caren said, throwing her arms around the young noblewoman, who let out a startled cry. I was surprised to see her acting like that with anyone other than our mother and me.

“C-Caren,” Lady Stella complained, “not so tight.”

You see how she is, but please look out for her, I told Lady Stella with a glance. *You don’t need to bother guiding me; I’m an alumnus, so I know my way—*

“Mr. Allen, allow me to take responsibility for guiding you on Caren’s behalf!” Lady Stella announced. She was so like her sister—once either one of them got an idea in her head, she ran with it without so much as a backward glance.

*

Lady Stella led me on a walk through the academy’s well-worn corridors. The first-year lesson I had agreed to teach would apparently be held in a detached single-story classroom off the newly constructed east hall. We had barely said a word to each other since leaving the student council office on the top floor of the central building, and the only notable scenery out the windows was the towering Great Tree.

Lady Stella was walking stiffly ahead of me, looking just like Tina had at the entrance ceremony. I didn’t think she had any reason to be so nervous, but... Oh, of course; an adolescent girl *would* be nervous escorting a man she had only met that day, even if she had heard of him previously. And while Lydia would have been one thing, I must have been a disappointment.

“Um, Lady Stella,” I called to her, unable to bear the awkwardness.

“Y-Yes?” she replied.

"That ribbon is a lovely color. It suits you."

"Thank you very much." After a short pause, she added, "It's a memento of my late mother."

I was taken aback for a moment. "My humble apologies."

"Please, don't let it bother you," she said. "I assume you've heard about me?"

"Somewhat," I admitted.

"I'm so embarrassed. I left home with almost nothing but this ribbon, my sword, my wand, and the clothes on my back...but I don't regret it!"

Lady Stella touched her ribbon and then tapped her sword and wand. Her eyes, which were as clear as Tina's, were filled with intelligence, determination, and a hint of anxiety. I seemed to recall that Caren had gone through a similar phase of overreaching herself.

"My father opposed my enrollment in the Royal Academy," the girl stated emphatically, clenching her right fist. "But I must inherit the Duchy of Howard. I still have a long road ahead of me, but I *will* become worthy of my name! Especially since my sister is working so hard as well." She giggled. "Did you know that we've been exchanging letters this whole time, Mr. Allen? That's why I was so startled just now; you're just as she described you."

"You must be great friends, then," I said. "I'll refrain from asking what she wrote—something tells me that knowing would turn my time tutoring her this weekend into something other than a lesson."

"She always writes how mean her tutor is, and after hearing your conversation with Caren, I'm inclined to believe her."

"Even you, Lady Stella?" I asked. "I'm quite a kind person, you know."

"Are you now?" she chirped back playfully. She seemed to have relaxed, and that hint of anxiety had vanished—perhaps I had imagined it. "I trust my dear little sister and my best friend over a gentleman I've only just met."

I returned her smile, and my hand reached toward her head—that bad habit of mine again—but I managed to withdraw it just in time. *I can't correct this habit fast enough*, I thought as Lady Stella stopped walking and looked at me quizzically.

"How odd," she said. "My sister wrote that you always give her a gentle rub on her head at times like this. She sounded so happy about it. Is that reserved for her, Ellie, Caren, and Lady Lydia Leinster?"

"I'm not certain that 'reserved' is the appropriate term," I replied. "I have rubbed Tina's and Ellie's heads occasionally, hardly 'always,' and Lydia's *very* rarely—I'm not devoid of common sense."

I'm sorry. That was a lie. Even Lynne's demands for head rubs had grown more insistent lately, to say nothing of the other two girls. I would have to be more careful. And Lydia? It was already too late for her—no amount of rubbing could spare me her wrath.

"Really?" Lady Stella asked. "But I was so certain."

"Certain of what?"

"That you rub and pat lots of girls on the head, regardless of who is watching."

"I do not," I insisted after a long pause.

"Oh, really?" she said. "What a shame; I'd hoped that I could convince you to do it for me as well."

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I'm not a professional head-rubber."

I'm sorry again; I almost reached for your head just now. I really must do something about this habit soon. Lady Stella might be laughing now, but I'm sure she would have been confused if I had actually done it.

All right; I've made up my mind! I'm going to restrain myself and limit my head-rubbing to an absolute minimum. I know that I can do it. My resolve will see me through!

I almost thought I could hear Caren's dispassionate voice saying, "Allen, maybe some things are just beyond you, no matter how determined you are."

"You and Lady Lydia graduated from this academy in just one year, didn't you?" Lady Stella asked excitedly as we descended the stairs. "I think I'll manage to graduate in the standard three years, but I can't imagine skipping any."

"Lydia deserves all the credit," I told her. "I was only allowed to graduate because she needed someone to keep an eye on her. She was quite a handful when she first enrolled here—from the day of our entrance exams, in fact. She used to wander around, slicing up whatever or whoever caught her eye."

"I've heard rumors, but was it really that bad, even from your perspective?"

"It was," I assured her. "She was already overwhelming when her sword was all she had, and she quickly became even more uncontrollable once she added magic to her arsenal."

"I've met Lady Lydia once or twice, at palace balls that my sister and I attended. I only said hello, but my sister got a chance to talk to her; she was overjoyed at the time."

"In that case, who told you about me?" I asked. "Don't tell me it was the professor again."

"I always looked forward to those stories," she confirmed. "And after I came here, I got them from Tina's letters."

Damn that man! Does he never tire of spreading rumors?!

Fine, then. It wasn't my style to take things lying down, and I had Duke Walter, Mr. Walker, and best of all, Lisa on my side. They seemed concerned that their old friend, the professor, was still single, so I could count on them to take action. Oh, I could hardly wait.

"You mustn't put too much faith in anything the professor or headmaster tells you," I told Lady Stella. "Take it with a grain—no, a whole spoonful of salt. They frequently embellish their stories so much that one can't even guess at the original."

"But the real you is so much more than the one I imagined," Lady Stella muttered under her breath, too softly for me to hear.

"Is something the matter?" I asked her.

"N-Not a thing!" she stammered. "Oh, it's straight through here. Do you mind if I sit in on your class?"

"If you can spare the time, I don't object."

"Great!" she exclaimed. "Thank you so much."

I wondered if she was worried about Tina—they did seem to be close, so I could understand her desire to see how her sister had grown. I just hoped that Tina and Lynne weren't fighting. The two of them were unduly sensitive to each other, perhaps because neither girl had ever had a friend her own age outside of her household. That made things difficult for Ellie. I would have to indulge her to make up for it—in some way that didn't involve my hand on her head.

"Oh, I can see it now," Lady Stella said. "That's it."

Her slender finger pointed to a large door engraved with the same plethora of sigils as the front gate. I had never been fond of such grandiose places—they reminded me of authority. Of course, I had been so busy getting dragged into all sorts of trouble by the albatross that I barely even remembered attending classes. Could this be a bit of kindness from the headmaster, then? I very much doubted it—a man given to gestures like that wouldn't be the professor's nemesis.

"I'll open this for you," Lady Stella said, placing a hand on the door. "I can hardly wait."

*

I entered the classroom and found more than ten fresh-faced first-years waiting for me. Being among the best students in their year, they were naturally sitting as close to the front of the classroom as they could manage. The classroom itself was designed like a small lecture hall, with a high ceiling and windows that admitted beams of spring sunshine. It ought to be safe for spellcasting as long as I erected a barrier.

The sight of Lady Stella and me brought doubtful looks to several students' faces. Before they had a chance to speak, however, two exclamations of surprise and a shout of "Dear brother!" arose from Tina, Ellie, and Lynne, who had taken up positions in the front row.

"Class is about to begin," Lady Stella warned them, undaunted.

"Y-Yes, ma'am!" all three girls chorused back as they hurriedly returned to their seats.

Lady Stella nodded to me and then withdrew to a position against the back wall—she was a model upperclassman.

Now, shall we begin?

I stood before the center of the blackboard and introduced myself. "It's a pleasure to meet you. My name is Allen, and I will be serving as your teacher for the next month. I'm technically an alumnus of this academy, and I look forward to our lessons."

Silence. Tina, Ellie, and Lynne were bright-eyed with excitement, but they were the only ones; all the other children expressed their doubts.

"U-Unacceptable! How can you be our teacher? I'd rather take lessons from the student council president!" a determined-looking girl with blonde ringlets protested from one side of the front row.

"So would I! We're the most advanced class of our year; we don't have time to waste learning from some young temporary teacher from who-knows-where," a spectacled boy with dark brown hair added from the other.

They must have already been familiar with the Royal Academy's faculty, which meant they were likely the children of influential nobles.

"In that case," I replied, "what can I do to convince you?"

"You just said that you're an alumnus," the blonde girl replied. "How long ago did you enroll here?"

"Four years ago."

"Four years ago?" she repeated. "Then, if you advanced to the university, you must still be studying there. A student is hardly qualified to teach, temporarily or—"

"I graduated this spring."

"Excuse me?" The girl looked taken aback, and a hushed stir ran through the classroom. Still, I was telling the truth.

"Y-You're lying!" the boy shouted angrily, pounding on his desk. "The Royal Academy is officially a three-year school, and the university takes at least four years on top of that. If you're telling the truth, you would have had to skip years several times at—"

"I skipped three in total," I informed him. "Although the original plan was for me to graduate from the university in a single year as well."

"What...?"

"...Huh?"

The shock wasn't confined to the girl and boy this time—the whole class seemed shaken, except for Tina, Ellie, and Lynne, who swelled with pride.

"I'm sorry to say that I don't carry my diplomas everywhere I go," I continued with an exaggerated shrug. "Do you have any other questions? I'll answer any that I'm able to."

"Yes! Me! I do!" A little hand shot up immediately, accompanied by a lock of hair that made its presence known from under its owner's beret. It was Tina.

I'm glad to see you so enthusiastic, but I was really asking for questions from anyone except *you girls.*

"Yes?" I asked her after a brief pause.

"Tell me all about how you first met Lydia!" she demanded.

"No."

"What?! But it's important! Absolutely vital!"

"Tina Howard, please be quiet. Does anyone else have a question?"

"Humph! You're so mean, sir!"

Good grief... Her Highness was being difficult. Did she expect me to relate such a terrifying experience? I couldn't possibly. It was still light outside, for one thing, and it would make some of the children cry, for another. I wished that Lady Stella wouldn't look as disappointed as her sister.

"By 'Lydia,'" the girl with the ringlets began timidly, "d-do you mean Her Highness, Lady Lydia Leinster, the Lady of the Sword?"

The boy looked nervous as well. Lydia's infamy had gotten out of hand, although I wouldn't deny that I had been involved in the majority of it.

"Yes, we were in the same year," I answered honestly by way of confession. "She's the albatross around my neck."

That brought on a major commotion.

"Is that all?" I asked with a clap of my hands. "In that case, I'd like to begin. You won't use textbooks in my lessons; I intend to leave lecturing in the capable hands of your other instructors and instead focus on practical application. We'll begin by going over the basics."

I wrote the words "element" and "rank" on the blackboard in large letters. When I turned to survey the class, I saw that about half of them had shifted their attention to the subject at hand. The remainder, with the exception of the excited trio, remained skeptical.

"I hear that you're the elite of the incoming class," I said. "You may find this too simple for you, but fundamentals are important. Ellie Walker."

"Y-Yessir!"

"Please come here. I'd like you to assist me."

Ellie cheerfully joined me, suddenly all smiles. I could almost sense a big tail wagging behind her even though she wasn't beastfolk—she really might have some canine qualities. Tina looked indignant, while Lynne maintained her composure, but their unruly hair expressed their shared displeasure.

"We'll start with the elements," I told the students. "How many elements are currently considered fundamental?"

The girl with the ringlets raised her hand. "Seven, but it used to be eight. Absolutely everyone knows that."

"Correct. And what are they?"

"The common elements are fire, water, earth, wind, and lightning. The addition of light and darkness, which only a small minority use, makes seven. The eight classical elements also included ice, represented by the Ducal House of Howard."

"That's right. Now, is it possible for one person to use multiple elements?"

After a brief pause, the spectacled boy answered, glaring at me all the while. "It's theoretically possible, and some experienced sorcerers do...but it's difficult."

Oh, so that's still how they see it. I suppose that hasn't changed much since my time here. In that case, I think I'll surprise them.

"Ellie." I addressed the girl who was standing at attention like an obedient puppy waiting for orders.

"Y-Yessir!" she responded.

"Would you use magic to make 'flowers' bloom for me? Only as many as you're able to."

"A-All right." Ellie took a step forward, rapidly deployed her spell formulae, and then activated them.

"I-I don't believe it..." someone exclaimed.

"Humph. I-I could do that too," the head of the class protested weakly.

"What's this? Are you still jealous?" the runner-up gibed. "You're always so narrow—make that *small*-minded."

"Wh-What were you looking at when you corrected yourself?! Y-You're hardly one to talk, anyway—you're even shorter than I am!"

"Th-The difference is negligible."

Stop that, you two. You have to get along.

Lady Stella and most of the class looked on in wonder as beautiful flowers of fire, water, earth, wind, ice, and darkness floated in the air before them.

"Thank you. I see you've made a lot of progress," I praised Ellie with a smile.

"Y-Yessir!" she responded and then giggled happily.

"I'll fill in the remaining two elements," I said, instantly producing flowers of light and lightning to float beside hers. All eight together made quite a sight.

I dispelled all the flowers with a snap of my fingers, causing the students to blink in surprise.

"I'm sure that your future lessons will teach you the same thing this young man just said—that controlling multiple elements is difficult," I said. "You've just witnessed the reality. I can't tell you any more—the great, exalted Archmage forbids it—but I urge you to have faith in your own potential and not to discard it without making the attempt. Next...”

Tina was giving me a look that said, “I’m next, right? Who else could it possibly be?!” She seemed liable to damage the furniture in her enthusiasm, especially as she apparently still had difficulty restraining herself.

“Lynne Leinster,” I said.

“Yes, sir,” Lynne crowed. She then paused to snigger at Tina, who stifled an angry retort.

Don’t provoke her.

Lynne approached me, trading places with Ellie. She still appeared composed at first glance, but the unruly lock of hair sticking out from under her beret was bobbing happily.

“Now that we’ve reviewed the elements, I’d like to touch on the ranks of magic,” I said. “Does anyone know what they are?”

“I do, dear brother.” Lynne answered before anyone had a chance to raise their hand. “In our kingdom, spells are classified as elementary, intermediate, or advanced based on their power and area of effect. There are exceptions, such as the supreme spells passed down in the Four Great Dukedoms, including my own House of Leinster, but their wielders are few. I have heard that the royal family possesses secret spells as well, but I know no more about them. I apologize for my ignorance.”

“That’s correct,” I told her. “You must have been studying hard. The royal family’s magic is classified, so I don’t know what it is either. The flowers that you just saw were an example of elementary magic. Now, I have a question for you—can anyone here cast an advanced spell?”

Three people raised their hands—Tina, Lynne, and Lady Stella, who must have been an excellent student. The rest of the class looked disappointed.

Don’t let it get to you, Ellie.

“There’s no need to worry if you can’t—your education is only just beginning. That said, it wouldn’t hurt for you to see what an advanced spell looks like. Lynne.”

“At once, dear brother! May I count on your assistance with barriers?”

“Don’t worry. You may.”

“Thank you very much.”

Lynne drew her beautifully crafted sword and began deploying the advanced fire spell Scorching Sphere on its tip. Lady Stella looked nervous and reached for her wand, but I signaled her to stop with a glance. The students had fear in their eyes as well, but not one of them tried to flee; their gazes were all fixed intently on the advanced spell taking shape on Lynne's sword point.

The massive fireball was complete, although the fire-resistant barriers I had surrounded it with contained its heat. Lynne's construction lacked polish, but it was still good enough to stand up to real combat. I was impressed.

"This is an example of advanced magic," I told the students, dismantling both the spell and the barriers with a wave of my right hand. "Deploying and activating a spell within a barrier you've set in place is also a highly effective technique in practice. I suggest you learn it—you run the risk of injuring yourself or your allies with such a powerful spell otherwise. Thank you, Lynne. You've made significant progress as well."

"I'll keep improving," Lynne replied. "After all, I'll have you here to learn from as well as my dear sister from now on, so—"

"Lynne," I interrupted her, pressing my index finger to my lips.

All of the students appeared to be children of the nobility, so they likely understood that I was involved with the Howards and Leinsters, but I hoped to keep my tutoring position a secret. I wouldn't want any more students on my hands. The clever girl showed her understanding with a nod. I wished that her sister would learn to emulate some of her tact.

Tina slammed both her hands onto her desk with a crash and stood up, brandishing her rod. "Sir! It has to be my turn next!" she shouted. "You're only calling on Ellie and her—it's not fair! It's favoritism! Unmistakable bias! I must protest!"

"Tina Howard, please be quiet," I told her. "This is your second warning."

She fumed, puffing up her cheeks and stamping her feet in frustration.

"Dear me," Lynne said. "Are you going to bother Mr. Allen at school as well, Miss First Place?"

"Shall we settle things?" Tina asked after a tense pause.

"I suppose we—"

"What are you waiting for? If you won't make the first move, I will!"

Tina vaulted over her desk with a shout, in a display that was hardly ladylike. She landed with her rod at the ready and began weaving spells. Her redheaded target saw what she was doing and threw her arms around me.

"Eek," Lynne said, giving an unnatural, wooden performance. "Dear brother, Miss First Place is bullying me. Please, come to my rescue."

Tina looked taken aback.

"Lynne, you're disrupting the lesson," I said after a moment of silence.

"Get away from her, sir!" Tina shouted. "At once!"

I wish these two would save their roughhousing for their mansions, I thought as I peeled the red-haired young noblewoman off of me and felt a sudden blast of cold. The temperature in the classroom was plummeting rapidly. There was frost on the windowpanes and a growing number of ice crystals fluttering in the air. I noticed that Tina had raised her rod above her head and was in the process of weaving a spell. The problem, however, was the particular spell she had chosen.

I can't believe she's skipping straight to Blizzard Wolf... I thought, covering my face with my left hand. *Honestly, I'd like to give whoever taught her a piece of my—*

Fresh screams rang out in the classroom, interrupting my thoughts.

"I-I don't believe it," one of the students spluttered. "Th-This can't be real, can it?! Wh-What is this mana?!"

"I-It can't be..." breathed another. "M-Mana like this just isn't possible. I-It shouldn't exist... I-Is this what the Four Great Dukedoms are capable of? A-Are they that far beyond us?! Was that rumor that she c-can't use magic a lie?!"

"No. It can't be..." Stella said under her breath. "That's..."

The students' reactions didn't surprise me. They didn't know what Tina was trying to manifest—although Stella might have guessed—but they could still sense her mana.

The whole building would collapse if Tina's spell activated, so I intervened in her spell formula and disassembled her Blizzard Wolf before it was fully formed. I also suppressed the fluttering ice crystals while I was at it. I then approached Tina with a sigh and brought my fist down on her head, prompting a startled cry from her.

"Please don't try to cast spells like that," I told her. "That wasn't very nice of you."

"B-But..." Tina whined.

Lynne laughed. "Don't you even know right from wrong, Miss First Place?"

"What?! The nerve of you!"

"Lynne, come here as well," I told the girl who was taking every chance she got to goad Tina. Lynne walked over to us, looking startled, and then let out a little cry when I gave her a rap on the head as well.

"You're at fault too," I said. "You were always such a nice girl, but I'm sad to see that you've turned to mischief and decided to make trouble for me."

"Y-You've got it all wrong, dear brother," Lynne stammered. "I-I was just..."

"Listen." I knelt down and pointed to the silver crescent moon and shooting star insignias on their berets, which marked them as first and second in their year, as I slowly lectured them. "The two of you are among the most gifted of your generation, and your talent comes with responsibility. Remember our conversation in the carriage. Now, what do you say when you've done something wrong?"

"Sorry..." both girls answered dejectedly.

"Very good. Now, go back to your seats."

"Yes, sir."

They obediently took their seats.

Good.

After surveying the classroom of dazed students, I took out my pocket watch and checked it—we still had more time. All three girls had done their best, so it was my turn to follow suit.

"I hope you found that firsthand experience of the elements and ranks of magic useful. Please don't mention that last spell to anyone. Next, I'd like to show you something amusing. Learn what you can from it."

*

This time, I wrote "compound activation" on the blackboard.

"The spells that your two classmates just showed you were examples of independent activation," I explained. "I doubt you'll have many opportunities to interact with any other type of spell in your classes, but there is much more to magic. For instance...”

I closed my right hand and cast an elementary spell, then opened it again and allowed the result—a flame within a sphere of water—to float free. I had gotten a lot of use out of this trick on the rivers back home—one could even catch fish with it.

To my embarrassment, the trio praised my display effusively.

“W-Wow!”

“I-It’s so pretty.”

“Magnificent, dear brother.”

The other students were equally enthusiastic. Some even applauded.

“Compound spellcasting like this is possible with a little practice,” I continued. “This is an application of spellcasting within a barrier.”

The girl with the ringlets suddenly raised a hand. “I-I have a question!” she interjected. She certainly had a lot of those.

“I’m all ears,” I encouraged her, dismissing my spell.

“C-Could you do that with other elements as well...sir?” she asked, adopting a more respectful tone. “With light and darkness, for example? They’re supposed to be the most difficult to combine.”

“I can give it a try.”

A simple repeat performance wouldn’t be much fun. Hmm... Oh, I’ve got it!

I closed both hands, activated my spells, and then opened them to release floating globes of light and darkness. “This will darken the classroom,” I warned the students, “but have no fear; it’s harmless.”

I used a darkness spell to dim the light in the classroom and then merged the two globes into a single sphere dotted with points of escaping radiance that shifted position over time. I spun the sphere, projecting patterns of light and shadow on the classroom ceiling and lending the space an air of mystery. A hearty round of applause suggested that my performance had gone over well.

The spell was purely for entertainment—I had only invented it because Lydia begged me to, and I had never expected it to see the light of day. It had no offensive applications, so it was even safe for children. I enjoyed the spectacle for a while, then dismissed the spell with a snap of my fingers.

"What did you think of that?" I asked the students. "I'm sure you'll all learn to do at least this much while carrying on a conversation. Please abandon the idea that it's just beyond you. I know a girl who had put more effort into her swordplay than anyone else her age in the kingdom—perhaps even in the whole continent—by the time she began her studies at the Royal Academy. As a result, she was able to slice through advanced spells with ease during her entrance exam. There's always a way as long as you keep trying."

I may have dressed that up too much... I bet she'd tease me if she were here—either that or turn her sword on me to cover her embarrassment.

The students were all enthusiastically taking notes. They were good kids. As I surveyed them, my gaze met Lady Stella's...but she quickly looked away. Perhaps I had offended her with too many silly tricks.

"I have—" the spectacled boy began, his hand grudgingly raised, but then he stopped and corrected himself. "May I ask another question, sir?"

"Of course you may," I replied.

I doubted that his sensibilities were particularly twisted, especially as the interview portion of the entrance exam was supposedly designed to weed out children with an overinflated sense of their own destiny. And despite having a personality as troublesome as the professor's, the headmaster would never be unfaithful to his motto: "Come if you have talent; this academy cares not about status." He had apparently even refused admission to Prince Gerard. "Your Highness" and other honorific styles were also generally banned on campus, much to my relief, although not even that was enough to eliminate prejudice—I had still been the recipient of more than my fair share of envy.

"I read in a book that experienced sorcerers can create living creatures by magic," the boy said. "Are you able to do that too?"

Well now. He must be interested if he knows that at his age.

Unsurprisingly, the other students—with the exception of Tina, Ellie, Lynne, and Lady Stella—didn't quite seem to grasp what he meant. I supposed that a demonstration would do them no harm.

"Front row, please back up a little," I said, prompting a mass retreat of students to the back row, although there was really no need for them to move that far. Only Tina, Ellie, and Lynne remained, looking cheerful in contrast to their anxious classmates. The whole class—even the students who had initially objected to my presence—was staring intently at my hands, determined not to miss a thing. I approved of their attitude, regardless of what motivated it.

I slid my left hand through the air, deploying eight spell formulae, then repeated the gesture with my right. Finally, I brought my hands together and activated the spell on the desk in front of me. Magical orbs of eight colors—red, blue, brown, green, violet, azure, white, and black—began to change shape. I had managed to make some progress of my own alongside Tina and Ellie, although I still wasn't certain if elementals existed.

There. That ought to do it.

The students gasped.

"These are magical creatures of all eight elements," I explained. "I gave them the forms of birds and wolves, and they should persist until roughly the end of this lesson. Feel free to touch them; they can't harm you. Pick them up and see for yourselves, but be gentle with them."

Palm-sized magical creatures were frolicking on the desktop. I was pleased to see that they had come out looking adorable.

Tina and Ellie immediately snatched up a wolf cub of ice and a little bird of wind, respectively. They moved fast, possibly because they had seen me do much the same thing at the Howard mansion. Lynne was a little slower to clasp a small bird of fire. The other students also hurried over and began hesitantly reaching out to touch the tiny creatures. I smiled at the ensuing chorus of surprised exclamations.

Lady Stella, there's no need to hang back. Feel free to join in. It's fun.

"It's not hot..." Lynne said quietly after a moment. "But I sense the fire element. Dear brother?"

"That's the way I made it," I said. "You'll be able to do the same soon enough."

Lynne stroked the little bird in silence. Perhaps she was concealing her reaction. Her willful sister would have jumped straight to a Firebird in this situation, but Lynne was both gentler and more prone to holding things in.

"What? Didn't you believe our teacher?" Tina gibed at her before I had a chance to say anything—presumably in payback for Lynne's earlier taunts. "Even though you're always shouting 'dear brother' this and 'dear brother' that? Simply unbelievable."

"Th-That's not it at all. I could never doubt Allen," Lynne protested, snapping out of her reverie. After a pause, she added, "It's not fair how you just swooped out of the blue to snatch up my — Never mind. Please forget I said anything."

Tina harrumphed. "If you have something to say, why not just come out and say it?"

"I will not."

"Tell me."

"I refuse."

"F-Fine, then! Be as pigheaded as you like, Miss Second Place."

"That's right," Lynne said, speaking as though she had just had a revelation. "I am in second place. Do you realize what that means?"

Tina looked confused. "You're just bluffing to—"

"It means this," Lynne interrupted her, pointing to the silver pin on her own beret. Tina looked questioning for a moment before the realization struck her and she stumbled backward a few steps.

"Y-You don't mean you...*match*?!" she exclaimed, aghast.

Lynne laughed. "That's right. Allen was second in his class when he enrolled, and you're first. That means that his pin was different from yours!"

"Th-That... Th-That can't be..." Tina stammered, slowly turning her head to look at me. "S-Sir?"

Indeed, my silver pin was a shooting star as well.

Tina's shoulders slumped. "I-I should have realized..." she said after a moment of silence.

"I'll let you have first place on the exam," Lynne remarked, continuing her taunting. "As long as I graduate at the head of the class, I'll match my dear brother *and* sister!"

"W-Well, I can do the same by graduating second in the class," Tina said, struggling for a retort.

"You mean you'd neglect your studies?" Lynne asked mockingly. "What would Allen think of that?"

"H-How dare you!"

"The Leinster family motto is 'the final victor is the true victor,' and I'm going to claim victory over you."

"I-I won't let you!" Tina declared and then paused in consideration. "B-But wait—if I beat you, then he and I won't match."

What a relaxing conversation; peace really is best, I thought as I watched the pair. *This* is *peace, isn't it?*

Ellie got my attention with a reserved tug on my left sleeve. She seemed to have passed the bird of wind on to another student—a girl who was currently prodding it timidly with a finger. What could be the matter?

"Um, e-excuse me, Allen, sir," the maid said. "I'd like to make these myself."

"Hmm. That might be a little difficult for you," I replied. "Give me your hand."

"Huh? Oh, y-yessir."

"Just relax and picture Anko."

I set about ever so slowly constructing the spell, focusing on the element of darkness, with which I had demonstrated the process for her before. The formula was of my own invention, with plenty of blank space, and I had improved it so that it was easier to understand. A tiny black cat materialized in my closed hand and leapt onto Ellie's shoulder, provoking a cry of surprise.

"Th-Thank you so much," Ellie said.

"It's less powerful than the one I made at the Howard mansion, but I hope it helped you grasp the process," I replied. "We'll practice this weekend. Given your mana, I have high hopes for your creations."

"Y-Yessir."

She was such a good student. I reached out a hand to— Oh! That wouldn't do. I'd only just sworn to break that habit. Caren would be upset with me, and surely Ellie wouldn't want her head rubbed in public either.

"Allen, sir," the maid said, removing her beret and moving half a step closer to me.

I suppose I've got no choice, I thought, trying to convince myself that this wouldn't count against me. I gently stroked her head, earning myself a delighted smile that no one would be able to resist. The nearby girls blushed, while the boys gritted their teeth and pounded their fists on their desks. I wasn’t without sympathy for their position—Ellie *was* adorable.

Ice crystals and plumes of flame surrounded me.

Oh dear.

"Sir?" Tina asked through gritted teeth.

"Dear brother?" Lynne added. They were both staring daggers at me.

I winked and dismantled the wolf and bird they were constructing with a snap of my fingers.

Ha ha ha! No one's had more experience forestalling supreme spells than I have in the past four years! Ah... What an awful thing to have gotten used to... I thought sadly, feeling that I had lost something important along the way.

"Sir! Dispelling is cheating!" Tina exclaimed indignantly. "And if you're going to do *that* for Ellie, then do it for me too."

"Dear brother, my head is as bare as hers," Lynne chimed in. "Is this coincidence? No! This is destiny. Please feel free."

"You two *do* realize that class is technically still in session, don't you?" I said. "Now, return to your seats."

"Humph! Very well, then. Who needs you when I have this little guy to keep me company?" Tina stormed off with her wolf cub.

"I'll ask you again later." Lynne likewise withdrew with her little bird.

"Th-Thank you very much." Ellie giggled and also returned to her seat.

I checked my pocket watch again. I was just thinking that I might as well end class on the early side, given that the next period was lunch, when a fair, slender hand quietly rose into the air. It was Lady Stella.

"Mr. Allen, I realize that I'm not a student in this class, but please permit me to ask a question," she said. "What level of magic are you, um, capable of using? Have you mastered supreme spells, by any chance?"

Tension shot through the classroom. Lady Stella's gaze was absolutely serious—the spells that Tina and Lynne had attempted must have aroused her concern. That might have been a consequence of her position as heir to a ducal house. Even Lydia had been seriously concerned about her mastery of supreme spells at one point, so it might have been a more pressing issue than I realized. That said...it was an easy question to answer.

"You overestimate me," I said with an exaggerated shake of my head. "I probably have the least mana of anyone here, and intermediate spells are the best I can cast. I lack the mana for advanced spells, so while I can construct their formulae, I'm incapable of activating them."

A room full of shocked expressions greeted that revelation.

"But even with that limitation, I was still able to graduate from the Royal Academy and the university," I continued. "Both schools demand more of their students than their quantity of mana or the number of elements and spells they have mastered."

"But—" Lady Stella tried to interject.

"What matters is the endurance to simply continue applying oneself without losing heart, without becoming arrogant, and without comparing oneself to others. That's equally true in swordplay, sorcery, and academia. That's what I believe, and I reckon I've held to that principle." I paused for a moment before adding, "Of course, I doubt that carries much weight coming from the likes of me."

"That's not true at all," Lady Stella persisted. "But... But I..."

I may have underestimated this young lady's issues.

"E-Excuse me." The girl with the ringlets spoke up. "I'm terribly sorry to interrupt, but I think it's high time you told us."

"Told you what?" I asked.

"Mr. Allen," the girl said, "are you the Lady of the Sword's partner, by any chance?"

"You seem to be on good terms with...Tina Howard, as well as Lynne Leinster and Ellie Walker," the spectacled boy added, giving in to curiosity and struggling not to use the girls' titles. "Could you be the person she mentioned at the entrance ceremony?"

I surveyed the classroom and saw that the three girls looked delighted, while the rest of the class was bursting with curiosity. I decided to dodge the question.

"Who can say? Oh, would you look at the time. That's all for today's lesson. I'll be teaching you another three or four times, and beginning with our next lesson, I'll be asking you to show me what you're capable of. I wish you all good fortune in the battle to claim seats for lunch."

I would never give a clear answer; spreading myself any thinner than I already had would inevitably lengthen Caren's lectures and earn me plenty of bullying courtesy of the albatross. I erased the blackboard and decided to hurry to the Leinster mansion for—

Hm?

The girls were clinging to the hem of my coat, and even the other students were gathered around me.

"Sir, it's time for lunch!" Tina announced.

"I'd love to eat lunch with you, Allen, sir," Ellie added.

"This is a perfect opportunity, dear brother," Lynne chimed in.

"I really shouldn't..." I tried to refuse, but Tina and Lynne smiled wickedly and began to speak loudly so that the other students would be sure to hear them.

"I still haven't heard the story of how you met Lydia!"

"And I would love to hear all about your adventures with my dear sister!"

That certainly got the other students' attention.

"T-Tina, L-Lynne," I protested weakly.

"A-Allen, sir, would you, um, please t-tell us?" Ellie asked, staring up at me. The other students had their eyes on me as well. It was too much!

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Lady Stella bow her head and leave the classroom. I hoped she would be all right; I would need to let Caren know.

Another bout of tugging on the hem of my coat distracted me.

"Sir!"

"A-Allen, sir."

"Dear brother."

It shouldn't be difficult to guess what became of me after that. My students were getting better at manipulating me by the day. I was uncertain whether to rejoice at their growth or lament that I was so easily swayed, but I resigned myself to a Firebird in my future.

*

That weekend would be my first spent tutoring the girls since they had begun attending the Royal Academy. We were in the inner courtyard, not of the Howard residence, but of the Leinster mansion. The profusion of spring flowers did much to soothe my battered soul.

The girls, who had been practicing with enthusiasm until mere moments before, were nowhere to be seen—they were taking their afternoon break. The courtyard was empty except for me and the mastermind behind the situation, who was lounging in a chair beside me and reading a book.

I had a feeling this might happen. Does she even realize she's supposed to be undergoing punishment?

"What?" Lydia asked, glaring at me. "I know I'm lovely, but that's no excuse to stare like that."

"I'll admit that you're lovely," I said, "but isn't this rather high-handed?"

"Oh really? And who exactly broke his promise to me first?"

I bowed my head in silence. In the end, on that day when I had been roped into teaching at the Royal Academy, I hadn't made it back to the Leinster mansion for lunch. I had concluded my lesson without incident and was on the verge of returning posthaste when the girls—and even my other students—had detained me.

"We want to have lunch with you!" they had said. "Please tell us about the Lady of the Sword's exploits!" I had been unable to refuse their wide-eyed enthusiasm. Since I was at the academy, I had hoped that Caren would join us, but she had been unavailable—student council business must have kept her busy.

Lydia had given me quite the talking-to. "What's this?" she had said. "You're more interested in little girls than you are in me? Well now. I completely missed lunch, you know. I spent the whole time waiting for you to show up. It's not a big deal. I'm really not bothered. Not one bit."

She had gone on and on like that. It had seemed as though she might never stop. Only after a series of concessions on my part did she finally relent.

"I'll accept your temporary teaching job," she had said, "especially since it's partly for Lynne's sake. The next time I see that half-witted prince, I'll..." Her words trailed off into ominous laughter. "In exchange, I want you to do all your tutoring here until my suspension is lifted, and to let Lynne join in while you do. You ought to thank your generous mistress for letting you off so lightly!"

Did she realize that I hadn't been given a choice in the matter? I was just glad that Tina and Ellie had agreed to the change of location without much of a fuss. That said... I looked down at myself and cradled my head in my hands.

"Lydia, must I really put on formal wear every single time?" I asked the willful noblewoman, who was now whistling out of tune.

It couldn't hurt to try, I supposed.

"You must," she said.

"N-No matter what?"

"No matter what. I fixed that suit—and even made a spare—so you're going to wear it. Now, turn the page for me; I've finished this one."

So, there was no room for negotiation. As I reached over and turned the page, a faint citrus aroma made my heart beat faster. I couldn't help it.

Sh-She almost never wears perfume.

The young Lady Leinster in her scarlet dress smirked at me.

So, she noticed. Hey! Personal space!

"Come closer," she commanded.

"Why?" I said. "The girls will be back soon."

"Just do it!" she snapped. "While you're here, you're not just a private tutor; you're also my butler. And don't you forget it."

"Yes, yes."

"Only one 'yes'!"

The moment I approached her, she yanked me closer by the necktie.

Ugh.

"I've grown tired of reading," she said. "Read aloud to me."

"Excuse me?" I asked her after a moment of disbelieving silence. Wasn't that the latest popular romance novel she had there? I glanced down and speed-read the page. The heroine seemed to have just reunited with her lover, from whom she had been separated due to the difference in their social status, and the two were reconfirming their love. D-Did she seriously expect me to read this aloud...?

What was I to do? The look in her eyes said that she was in earnest. I racked my brain, but I couldn't come up with an excuse that would get me out of this predicament.

Wh-What a dilemma!

I didn't think I had been in straits this dire since that nuisance of a Hero had proposed to me. That had been a nightmare in its own right. She had only asked me because I'd just happened to be there when she'd decided that she "wanted to know about love." Her naivety belied her—

Another tug on my necktie interrupted my recollections. "Hurry up and read," Lydia said. "I don't have all day."

"G-Give me a moment," I protested. If, by any chance, the girls overheard me...

I detected multiple presences. Maids under Anna's command must have been lying in wait, alongside more under Mrs. Walker's! So, this was what it meant to be at one's last extremity! I wished that someone—anyone—would come to my rescue.

"Ah! I knew it!" Tina shouted as she raced toward us carrying a tea set on a tray.

Oh! A fairy has come to aid me!

My familiar sense of déjà vu proved justified as she let out a startled cry and seemed in danger of falling. *I knew it*, I thought as I slipped free of Lydia's wicked clutches and caught her.

"Please don't lose your head like Ellie does," I said to Tina. "Are you hurt?"

"I-I'm fine," she replied. "Th-Thank you, sir."

I was holding the tea tray in my right hand and supporting Tina with my left—not exactly a comfortable position. Tina had been curled up in my grasp until, without warning, she turned her lips toward me and closed her eyes.

Oh dear. This might be the death of me.

I sensed incredible bloodlust emanating from behind me, and with both my hands full, I was helpless to defend myself. There were multiple spells and flames ahead of me as well. W-Was there no escape?!

"Um, excuse me, Allen, sir, Lady Tina, but...I don't think you ought to behave like that!" Ellie cried.

"Dear brother, please get away from that presumptuous woman as quickly as you possibly can," Lynne added. "Don't dawdle!"

Oh, Lynne sounded just like Tina and Lydia for a moment there, I thought as a potentially lethal gout of flame closed in on me from behind. I evaded it while clutching Tina, who still had her eyes closed, then looked behind me—and immediately regretted it. Lydia looked beautiful in her dress, smiling with her sword drawn, but...I couldn't keep from tr-trembling.

"I see you'd like to get some sparring in," Lydia said. "Very well. I'll oblige you."

"Wait," I pleaded. "Th-This was entirely accidental! Y-You saw what happened!"

"You could have caught her with a levitation spell," she countered. "Don't expect me to believe that you couldn't have cast one fast enough. How could you be so eager to touch a younger girl, especially when you hardly ever lay a hand on me? As your mistress, I suppose I'll have to beat some sense into my servant. Besides, I still have a few questions for you. Now, stop dawdling and prepare yourself. I won't accept your surrender without a fight, so entertain me with the best resistance you can manage."

Did you mean to say all that out loud?! Your true, sinister motives are showing! Anyway, if I did touch you, you'd get angry at me for that too. And you have questions for me? Wh-What could those be about...?

I was caught between the Lady of the Sword behind me and her sister, along with a maid readying more spells than I could count, in front of me.

Tina, open your eyes and step away from me.

"No!" She clung to me even tighter.

This might be the end for me.

I hope that I may be allowed to omit what became of me thereafter for the sake of my honor and dignity.

Mom and dad back home...your little Allen may now be unfit for love as well as marriage.

Chapter 4

A week in the kingdom is eight days, in accordance with the Unified Continental Calendar. The days of the week were named for the eight elements—fire, water, earth, wind, lightning, ice, light, and darkness. Contemporary magic recognized only seven elements, but that decision had been made following the War of the Dark Lord two centuries prior, making Iceday a remnant of the days of the eight classical elements.

Customarily, Lightday was considered a day of prayer, although as a nonbeliever, I rarely went to church myself. Besides, God only sent me trials lately, no matter how much I prayed. Some salvation would have been nice. Of course, religion wasn't especially powerful in the kingdom, so I suspected that weekly churchgoers were in the minority. The next day, Darknessday, was a pure day of rest. Even public institutions only did the bare minimum on these two days off.

The Royal Academy held classes until noon on Icedays. Once the girls reached their second year, they would be able to choose their courses and manage their own schedules. As first-years, however, numerous fundamental courses kept them tied down for long hours. I had therefore assumed that I would be tutoring them on Lightdays, Darknessdays, or some combination of the two—they would naturally want days to relax or enjoy themselves. With that in mind, I had guessed that we would be spending at most a day and a half together, leaving the remainder of my weekends free. In hindsight, I realized how naive my outlook had been.

I had many investigations to pursue in addition to preparing the girls' lessons—Frigid Crane and the other great spells, the diary I had asked the headmaster to decrypt, Duchess Rosa's fate... I had also found myself busier than I'd anticipated during the first month of the Royal Academy's school year. A few days prior, however, my stint teaching at the academy had come to an end, leaving me with weekday mornings free. Lydia's suspension had also been lifted, and she had resumed her duties at the palace. Getting her to go had been a chore, of course.

Hang on. Am I having the same thoughts every time?

"What's got you looking so down?" the professor said, interrupting my reverie. "Take a break. I've made tea."

"Oh, thank you," I answered, setting down my pen on my notebook and stretching. I was exhausted, but I had finished my preparations for the next day. I hoped that the girls would enjoy what I'd come up with.

I was in the professor's office, where Lydia and I had spent three years together. The tucked-away space was furnished with desks and chairs and surrounded on all sides by bookshelves. I would hesitate to call it spacious, but there was something calming about the room. I surveyed the unruly arrangement of old and unusual books as I sipped my tea, which was irritatingly delicious.

He lives for his hobbies, damn him. I see him smirking at me.

"I'm sorry to borrow your office space every week," I said.

"Think nothing of it," he assured me. "My students are almost never here at this time, anyway, so make yourself at home. That said, your visits are a secret. You're a popular man, and I'd have a riot on my hands if it got out that I've been monopolizing your time."

"Why bother with such an obvious lie?" I asked. "Only my old juniors from your department spare so much as a word for me."

"Of course not," he said. "No one is allowed to speak to you without Lydia's... Forget I said anything. That was but a slip of the tongue. In any case, you are both unquestionably popular. I hope you've been taking care when you walk around the university."

"I've been discreet," I said, shooting him a quizzical look.

"Good. Feel free to continue doing your work here. You're certainly passionate about it—I can't believe you put together notebooks for three students every week."

One major change in my plans was the addition of Lydia and Lynne to my weekend tutoring sessions. Lydia had joined me as a fellow instructor—she was surprisingly fond of helping others, and she was eager to look over and revise my notes. Things had worked themselves out so that I taught theory alongside long- and mid-range techniques, while she took charge of everything to do with close-quarters combat. I was certain that it had been a valuable month for the girls. One didn't have to be a swordswoman to benefit from knowing how one moved and thought, and they had unmistakably improved the way they moved considerably.

From that week on, I would be tutoring alone, and at the Howard mansion. According to Tina and Ellie, Mrs. Walker and the other maids were eager for the change. I had yet to ask Lynne if she would be continuing to participate or whether she would take this opportunity to withdraw; I ought to do that when I visited the Leinsters that evening. I was glad that she had made friends with Tina and Ellie, but it looked to me as though she might only have joined our lessons because Lydia had told her to, and I wanted to respect her wishes in the matter. She didn't have to worry about falling behind in her schoolwork, and given how hard she had worked to earn her place at the academy, I hoped that she would make room for enjoyment in her student life rather than spending every waking moment studying.

That went for Tina and Ellie as well. Taking time to rest and play was important, at least in my opinion. Their lessons with me currently began on Iceday afternoons and ended on Darknessday nights. They had Lightday mornings off, since it was a day of worship, but we tended to spend that time together regardless, meaning that I was with them all weekend.

I ought to take them on an outing. They are growing girls, after all.

"Sir, our lessons run from Iceday afternoon through Darknessday night, don't they? Isn't that right?" Tina had pressed me during our lunch together at the Royal Academy. I hadn't known what to say. I had done my best to talk her out of it, but both she and Ellie had been adamant. Even Lynne had thrown her weight behind them. After a long back-and-forth argument, we had compromised that I would only stay the night on Lightday. I thought that I had acquitted myself well, although Caren had been even colder to me than usual when she heard the details.

"Getting younger girls to wait on you with Lydia's seal of approval?" she had said. "I'll be reporting this to mom and dad."

You've got it all wrong—this is my job! Stop making it sound so sinister!

To my sorrow, Caren had been awfully hard on me lately. That said, I had suspected that she had something she wanted to discuss after she had finished chewing me out. She could be reserved—I wondered where she got that from—so she required displays of brotherly affection from time to time. It wasn't as though I *wanted* to spoil her.

Anko approached me, and I rubbed the familiar's belly to mentally recharge myself while I continued my conversation with the professor.

"I'd love to take you up on that offer, if you don't mind," I said. "It's difficult to work uninterrupted in the Leinster or Howard mansions. I could always do this in my lodgings, but my sister has been visiting them more often lately."

The professor laughed. "What a lovely cup of tea," he remarked. "What has that rotten elf made of the diary you asked for his help with? I bet he's gotten bogged down by now. He must be up to his eyeballs in that mess."

"You're quite right. Professor..."

"My answer is 'no.' If it would spare me working with that man, I would even take a bride! To my great sorrow, I might add."

"You know, you might consider settling down regardless," I suggested.

"I think not, Allen," he proclaimed. "I love freedom with all my heart!"

"Is that so?" I asked mechanically and then tried a different tack. "Frigid Crane may be stable now, but we still need to establish some means of controlling it. There's no guarantee that we'll find one in the diary, but it was the only document in the Howards' possession that might offer a clue."

"If he begs for my help, I'll consider it," the professor offered grudgingly. "That cipher is tough. It dates back to approximately five centuries ago, during the age when great spells were in use on the continent. As you speculated, it was written by a woman—one possessed of inconceivable talent. And what's more—"

"I know." I cut him off. "Deciphering it reveals nothing but complaints. It's a task that wears on one's nerves."

"All the more reason to let him decipher as much of it as he possibly can. His advanced age must have brought him *some* wisdom—at least, I certainly hope so."

There it was—the professor's worst side, reserved for his confrontations with the headmaster. He'd said his piece, and it didn't sound like any amount of pleading would move him to lend a hand in the near future.

"I leave the matter in your hands," I said. "I'd prefer that you act sooner rather than later."

I had laid the groundwork to spur the professor to action by pulling some strings, and I would pitch in myself when I could afford the time. Still, it was no easy feat. The diary had astonished that elf, and he hated to show any sign of weakness.

"The encryption grows more difficult with every page," he had groaned. "The sorceress who wrote this defies belief."

In all honesty, the headmaster wanted help as soon as he could get it. Lisa, who was still residing in the capital, had agreed to force the professor's hand, but not without compensation.

"I'll make a formal request to you soon," she had declared. "It should be no trouble for you. I believe you're free the first half of each week?"

I would wait cautiously. I was certain that her request would have something to do with the numerous interviews and business negotiations that she had taken me to as her escort recently, but I hadn't the faintest idea what she planned to make me do. The astronomical sums of money, goods, and promising personnel that had filled those discussions were alien to me.

Personally, I had found the number of weekday lunches we shared to be possibly more of an issue. There was nothing untoward about them, of course—we met for lunch because it wouldn't appear proper for Duchess Leinster to dine with company night after night after her husband had returned to their duchy. The food was delicious as well—I wished that I could invite my parents and Caren to every restaurant we had dined in.

That said, every lunch that I spent dining out with Lisa was a lunch that I didn't spend at the Leinster mansion, which didn't seem to sit well with the albatross. For all her audacity, Lisa was the one person who outmatched her. The frequency of Lydia's all-too-physical cries for attention and the force of her Firebird were increasing by the day, and they were a serious cause for alarm. And pointing that out would only cause her to sulk and lose her temper.

What would I do without Anko's fur to pet? Ah, how soothing it is.

"Lydia returned to duty the other day, didn't she?" the professor asked. "I suppose she grumbled about it."

"I leave that to your imagination," I replied after a long silence.

The professor laughed. "The court sorcerers don't interest her if you're not one of them. If it were up to me, I'd appoint her to lead them and retire to a life of seclusion at once. I'd even recommend her to command the royal guard at the same time."

"I'm sure she could do it," I said, "but she doesn't want to. She might jump at a diplomatic post, though; she's been reading a lot of travel literature recently."

"As far as I'm concerned, Allen, the most enjoyable part of any trip is planning it. Lydia, however, is a lady of action. I'm certain that she means to visit every place that strikes her fancy—with you in tow."

"I have no plans to see the whole continent," I replied after a pause.

I wouldn't put it past her—once she made up her mind to do something, she didn't hesitate to follow through. If she failed, she would just try again. I thought that I ought to follow her example—I tended to get bogged down in overthinking things, and I admired her ability to solve everything with spells and swordplay. Not that I would ever tell her so.

Anko raised its head and looked toward the door; it must have picked up on some sign. The professor and I followed suit, and a moment later, there came a polite knock.

"Come in," the professor answered.

"Pardon me," said the unexpected visitor. "Is Mr. Allen here?"

"Anna?" I asked. "Is something the matter?"

Into the room stepped a slender woman in the uniform of a maid—the House of Leinster's head maid Anna. I hadn't seen her in some time. She was Lisa's right-hand woman, and it was obvious even from my outsider's perspective that she had been kept busy of late. She had given up recording Lydia and Lynne—her "reason for living," as she never hesitated to admit publicly—and had been rushing back and forth between the royal capital and the south. I believed that she had even gone north just the other day.

What is *Lisa going to make me do?* I wondered with mounting anxiety.

In any case, the maid's presence could only mean that something was amiss. Lisa would have specified a time in person.

"I beg your pardon for interrupting you," Anna said, greeting the professor and me with a flawless curtsy.

"Is it Lydia?" I asked. The albatross's face was the first thing that popped into my head. I had done my best to warn her, but I regretfully doubted that she would take my advice to heart. She was as straightforward as the blade of her sword—a charming quality, as well as a rather troublesome one.

The name Anna uttered, however, defied my expectations.

"Not Lady Lydia," she said. "There's been a quarrel between Lady Lynne and Prince Gerard and his companions at the Royal Academy. I've only just received an urgent report about it myself, but I'm informed it may end in a duel. My mistress instructed me to alert Mr. Allen at once. Please accompany me, sir, and please, save Lady Lynne."

*

The academy was only a short walk from the Royal University. The two might as well have been right next to each other, but the headmaster had apparently objected on the grounds that it was "healthier to keep the two institutions separate." I could see his point, but it was inconvenient at times like this.

I was in such a hurry that even the few moments it took to greet the familiar guard at the main gate seemed tantalizingly slow. My destination was plain as day—I just needed to follow the unrestrained mana. It was coming from the Royal Academy's practical testing ground, the place where Lydia and I had first met.

The academy was in an uproar as everyone headed in the same direction that I was. Chaos was already breaking out in several places, and while teachers were doing their best to maintain order, I doubted that they would have much success under the circumstances. Even Anna and I had difficulty making our way through.

"It certainly is crowded," she remarked.

"Yes," I agreed. "I suspect that we'll be too late if we wait in line, so I suggest we use a trick."

"A trick, sir?"

"Anna, prepare a concealment spell," I said, swerving to touch one of the Great Tree's vines. Once I was certain that Anna's spell was active, I made the vine move.

Anna's eyes widened. "Mr. Allen, this is a beastfolk spell."

"Please don't tell anyone. Apart from my family, only the professor, Lisa, and Lydia know about this. It's also mana-intensive, so I only use it in emergencies," I explained as countless vines sped through the air, forming a path for us. *Thank you.* "Now, let's go."

"At once!" Anna responded.

We ran along the vines, quickly crossing the academy. It seemed as though Lynne wasn't the only one fighting; Tina and Ellie were with her. They were facing multiple opponents, one of whom had just gone down.

I'd like to know what's going on. Is there anyone I know who could — Oh!

"Caren," I called using wind magic.

My sister, who was caught in the throng below, looked around in surprise. I quickly lifted her out of the crowd.

"The vice president vanished?!" someone shouted.

I'm sorry for startling you. I promise to sort out the misunderstanding later.

"Allen!" Caren exclaimed. "Should you really be using this spell in public? I know you have the chiefs' permission, but a lot of people are still fussy about it."

"I'll accept any punishment they assign me," I said, motioning Caren and Anna to keep moving. "We can talk on the way."

"All right," Caren agreed after a short pause. Her eyes had shifted from their normal dark brown to deep violet, her ears and tail were standing on end, and her mana was amplified. I was startled to see her so visibly furious.

"Prince Gerard and several of his companions called at the academy without warning and demanded to see Lynne Leinster," she explained. "The headmaster wasn't here; he had gone to the palace with some of the teachers. I also wasn't the one who guided them to Lynne's classroom, since Stella worried it might be 'unpleasant' for me. The prince apparently insulted Lynne, at which point she and her friends lost their tempers with him. The prince's companions called that 'insolence,' and..." She allowed her words to trail off.

"I see," I said. "Lady Stella is with them, then?"

"Yes, although I don't think she's involved in the fight." Caren paused for a moment and then said, "We have to put a stop to this as soon as possible. I know those girls are amazing, but they're up against an adult prince."

"Let's hurry," I agreed.

They must have aimed for a time when the headmaster and the reform-minded faculty were absent. Most of the remaining faculty would be either fence-sitters or supporters of the nobility—they must have been the ones who informed the prince. But how could he cause a disturbance when his suspension had only just ended? Was he in his right mind? Didn't he realize that being stripped of his knighthood would affect his place in the line of succession? Knowing him, quite possibly not.

The prince's abnormal fixation on Lydia was at the bottom of this. His whole life, he had gotten everything he wanted; she was the sole exception. Even so, he would be wary of starting a fight in the palace after the scolding that His Majesty had given him. He must have decided that he could make do with the younger Leinster sister—that she would be just like Lydia in a few years' time. The thought made me sick.

"Allen," Caren said, squeezing my hand to show her concern.

"Don't worry, Caren," I replied. "Those girls would never lose to the likes of him. That reminds me—I'll have to properly introduce you to Tina and Ellie later. We've all been so busy that I never got the chance. I'm proud to be their tutor."

*

I've never felt confident in myself. Not once in my entire life. I do believe that I've made every possible effort as the eldest daughter of the Ducal House of Howard. That effort helped me to become president of the student council and earn some of the highest grades in my year. All that despite my father's cold attitude and his insistence that it was "hopeless." Those insignificant achievements gave me a little pride—or at least they had, until just one month earlier.

In the face of the reality of what I lacked, my pride turned out to be mere conceit. That was currently being brought home to me beyond a shadow of a doubt by my little sister, a maid I had known since childhood, and the younger sister of my idol, the Lady of the Sword.

"This... This is outrageous! Do you have any idea who I—"

Prince Gerard's shout ended in a grunt of pain as fire and ice—two supreme spells—pursued their target. The prince and his few hangers-on scrambled to avoid the onslaught, but their flight led them straight into a trap. Multiple intermediate wind spells activated beneath their feet, catching the hangers-on and sending them flying. They were scrambling to right themselves in midair when Ellie pursued them with a series of glowing scarlet palm strikes that connected cleanly and sent one man after another crashing to the ground, where they fainted in agony and lay still.

The prince blocked the wind spells with his sword and made a desperate attempt to cancel them out, but the Firebird and Blizzard Wolf returned to assail him from opposite sides. He shrieked as he ran wildly in an effort to escape, his knight's uniform unrecognizable under the dirt and dust that caked it.

I couldn't believe it. Tina had been completely incapable of using magic, and now she had mastered a supreme spell while Ellie the crybaby was flawlessly concealing intermediate spells.

I had heard about Allen's brilliance long before I had met him. He was the one and only person whom the Lady of the Sword allowed to stand at her side. Public opinion heaped all its praise on Lady Lydia, but from my perspective, he was every bit as impressive. Skipping years to graduate from the Royal Academy and university second in his class was a superhuman feat in and of itself.

When I had met Allen in person, he had been just as my sister described him—extremely kind, a little mean...and cruel. Compounding spells of opposing elements was immensely challenging, but he had accomplished it with ease. He had conjured magical creatures of every element as though it were nothing and even negated supreme spells. I could hardly believe that we were the same species, but it had also made sense to me. He had demonstrated that he deserved his place alongside the Lady of the Sword.

I understood enough of reality to know that there were some people I could never hope to overcome—whom it would be a waste of time even to challenge. It was smarter to avoid fighting people like that. Take my best friend Caren, for instance; I hadn't a prayer of ever defeating her. Her physical enhancement magic and lightning spells were so magnificent that I couldn't even be jealous of them. By all rights, she ought to be the student council president. I had only gained the office despite my lesser ability because I was "the future Duchess Howard"—an empty title—and because of Caren's beastfolk heritage. It was for those reasons that, when I had been chosen to lead the student council, I had been both relieved and ashamed of myself. *I avoided disgracing my name*, I had thought. *I'm sure that my father will praise me.*

It was the sight of the younger girls fighting courageously in front of me that had made me truly despair. The prince and his party had arrived without warning. He had forced me and a flustered teacher to lead him to Lynne, whom he had proceeded to ogle lasciviously.

“I’d have preferred your sister,” he had said, “but I suppose you’ll do. Rejoice—I’m going to make you mine. What’s this? Is that ‘the Howards’ cursed child’ sitting next to you? How amusing. You’ll join us.”

I had been unable to comprehend his meaning. Was he mad? Lynne had been stunned, and so had everyone else.

“What are you waiting for?” he had continued in a disgusting tone. “Come here. You’re still a child, but that has its own charms.”

Lynne’s answer had been too low to hear.

“Hm? What did you say?” the prince had asked.

“I said ‘no’! My answer is and always will be ‘no’!” Lynne had bellowed, pounding her desk with all her might and leaping to her feet. “And what do you mean, ‘cursed child’?! How dare you insult my friend!”

Tina and Ellie, who had been sitting next to her, began weaving spells and preparing for combat as well.

The prince had been shaken, possibly shocked by Lynne’s refusal. “What?!” he had screamed. “I-I show you kindness, and this is the thanks I get?! I see that you take after your sister, or is this that wretched lowlife’s doing? How dare an orphan raised by beastfolk defy me, Gerard Wainwright, a pillar of the royal family!” He had paused at that point and then continued in a calmer tone. “Something smells foul. That girl reeks like an animal; has she become his woman too? Humph. What an eccentric pair of sisters, and what a disgrace to the Leinster name. Well, Howard girl? Do you share their tastes?”

His words had been boorish, unworthy of royalty...and they had been the last straw.

“Take that back!” Tina had shouted, brandishing her rod at the prince. “Don’t you *dare* make fun of my friend Lynne!”

“Mr. Allen and Ms. Leinster are nothing like that!” Ellie had added. “And don’t insult Lady Tina and Lady Lynne!”

“Your Highness,” Lynne had said levelly after a moment of silence. “It would have been one thing if you had only insulted me, but I cannot overlook slights against my dear brother and sister...or against Tina.”

None of the three had hesitated to challenge His Highness, Second Prince Gerard. For what reason? How could they act when their antagonist was second in line to the throne? If they weren't careful, this issue could affect their whole families, and even their own lives.

Aren't you frightened?

The prince and his hangers-on, who had been watching the trio, couldn't have expected to be yelled at by girls so much younger than them. After a moment of mute amazement, they began to laugh. The girls, however, ignored their reaction. All three resolutely seized their berets and flung them forward, looking as though they were performing on stage.

It was an unmistakable challenge to a duel, but the prince and his companions' scornful laughter only grew louder. The gravity of the situation still escaped them. The girls, on the other hand, were in deadly earnest. They had no intention of letting anyone—not even a prince—insult their loved ones and get away with it.

"May I take it that you decline?" My sister's icy voice cut through the derisive laughter, freezing the classroom. "In that case, I shall petition the throne for a formal duel at a later date, with His Majesty, the Four Great Dukes, and Eight Great Marquesses in attendance. How do you respond?"

At that point, the prince and his friends had finally seemed to realize what they had just made an enemy of. Despite their youth, Tina Howard and Lynne Leinster were lineal descendants of ducal houses. The royal family could not ignore their request. Ellie Walker was likewise the only heir to the renowned Walker family; anyone with dealings in the north ignored her at their peril. If the three of them pressed their case, and it reached His Majesty's ears...there would be serious trouble.

With no other choice left, the prince's party had accepted the duel—never suspecting that it would prove even harsher than the alternative.

The Blizzard Wolf and Firebird with which Tina and Lynne had opened the duel had incapacitated half of the prince's hangers-on, and the remainder had fallen prey to Ellie's spells and martial arts. That left four people standing in the testing ground. Tina was hanging back and weaving spells with a beautiful rod, to which she had tied her ribbon. Lynne stood in the vanguard, gripping her sword in her right hand while commanding flames with her left. Ellie remained vigilant while she supported the other two with a variety of spells. And the prince...

The prince was in a sorry state.

The outcome was obvious. The students watching on the sidelines let out a cheer while the teachers panicked. I was glad—or at least I should have been. I should have been glad that my dear little sister and my childhood friend had grown so much—that Tina had learned to cast spells. I really had been glad when she had told me in one of her letters. I knew how much she had suffered.

But...I had also wondered. Could Mr. Allen be a magician like the ones I'd read about in storybooks when I was little? Tina had placed first on her entrance exam. Ellie had placed highly. Then there were the spells that they had demonstrated in class. And that day, my suspicions changed to certainty—Mr. Allen had accomplished a miracle, just as Tina had said at the entrance ceremony. Just four months previously, my sister had been incapable of casting elementary magic. Now she had mastered the supreme ice spell Blizzard Wolf, the symbol of the House of Howard. Her maid Ellie had been a scaredy-cat. Now, with staggering silence, she was crafting meticulous spell formulae and deploying more intermediate spells than I could count to dominate the arena. Even Lynne was casting Firebird and proving more than the prince's match in swordplay.

All three of them had far surpassed me, I realized as I struggled to hold back the dark feeling that threatened to fill my heart.

...No. I'm Stella Howard, their sister, their senior, and the president of the Royal Academy's student council. I have to endure this. I'm not the only one who's making an effort; I'm just not working hard enough compared to them. It's high time I put a stop to—

"I've had it with you!" Prince Gerard roared in a murderous rage just as I was about to step forward, flinging away his knight's sword and drawing the dagger at his hip. Blinding light filled the testing ground as tremendous mana overawed the surroundings.

"P-Prince Gerard?!" I cried, stammering. "That's the royal family's... If you unleash it here...!"

"Quiet!" he snapped. "I'm going to teach these foolish little girls their place!"

"Are you mad?!" I shouted back.

"Watch your tongue, good-for-nothing! I've heard all about how you'll never be able to master a supreme spell! The Howards have fallen on hard times if the likes of you is—"

"That's quite enough, thank you." A gentle voice interrupted the prince's raving as a young man alighted in front of the girls without a sound or a trace of mana. He looked like something out of a fairy tale.

Oh, I knew it. You really are a...

*

The trio were momentarily taken aback by my arrival in the testing ground. Then, they burst into exclamations.

"Sir?!"

"A-Allen, sir, um, y-you see..."

"D-Dear brother!"

The girls hurriedly tried to hide their weapons behind their backs. Who did they think they were fooling? I smiled sarcastically as I turned to face the prince.

"That's a dangerous item you have there," I said.

"Silence!" the prince shouted. "You again?! Stand aside! Those girls mean harm to the royal family, and I have to teach them a lesson!"

"Really?" I replied. "I doubt there's any point in my asking, but do you understand the situation? Your position isn't exactly enviable, and you're only making it worse."

"Don't you realize who I am?!" he bellowed. "I am the great Prince Gerard, heir to the exalted Wainwright bloodline!"

Was he always this *foolish? There's something off about his speech as well.*

No sooner had the second prince returned from his suspension than he had publicly made a pass at some Royal Academy schoolgirls, only to have the tables turned on him. And his targets had included daughters of the Four Great Dukedoms. No gag order would be able to stop people from talking completely, and unlike what had happened to me, this incident would be impossible to hush up. It could not fail to affect the royal family's prestige. Even a reordering of the line of succession was within the realm of possibility. The prince's professional superior, the commander of the royal guard, wasn't the type to defer to royalty either. I could imagine just what he would say.

"What have you done? You've just displayed your weak, stupid, disgraceful conduct to the whole world, that's what. Is there anything else I should add to my report?"

I couldn't have put it better myself. The prince simply failed to realize what— No, it must have seemed natural to him. He thought that being royalty—being special—gave him license to do whatever he pleased, never realizing that here, he would be treated as the eighth in command of the royal guard. He was hopeless.

"You should have left Lydia to me in the first place, lowborn scum!" the prince roared. "You've wasted all the consideration I've shown you! It just goes to show that animals don't understand mercy! Don't expect to see the light of day in this kingdom!"

"Anna, Caren," I said.

"Everyone's favorite Anna, at your service," the head maid chirped.

"Allen," Caren replied.

"I'm going to be somewhat serious about this," I told them. "Anna, may I ask you to keep everyone safe? Caren, you and Lady Stella guard the girls."

"Certainly!" Anna responded.

"All right," Caren agreed after a short pause.

I was just about to begin weaving my spells—when the cuffs of my coat were tugged from three directions.

"No!" Tina protested.

"W-We'd like to help," Ellie said.

"Dear brother, I'm not the girl I used to be," Lynne added.

I looked behind me and saw that Caren was uncertain what to do. What a troublesome bunch of students...

The prince's mana was of the light element, and...he was in the process of deploying part of a spell formula that I'd never seen before. It was quite old—likely predating the War of the Dark Lord. The spell was emanating from the prince's dagger.

I see. A relic passed down in the royal family. Hmm... This might not be completely beyond them, but it's still too soon.

"No," I told the trio. "Lady Stella."

"Y-Yes?!" Lady Stella responded.

"Have you contacted the headmaster?"

"No," she said. "He went to the royal palace."

"In that case—"

"What are you blabbering about?!" Gerard shouted, charging forward with his dagger. "Die!"

I might as well give it a try, I thought as I drew his attention to me with a barrage of elemental magic bolts from all directions—with an extra dash of ice to hinder his movements. Light burst from the blade of his dagger to form countless floating octagonal "shields" that deflected every spell that struck them.

Automatic defenses?

I switched spells and began raising one stone wall after another. The light immediately extended the dagger's blade to the length of a longsword, one stroke of which cleaved through more than ten of my barricades. The prince continued his charge.

Offense and defense in one. I'd love to make a thorough study of its capabilities on both fronts, I thought as I borrowed one of the swords stuck in the ground nearby and ran my hand along its blade to activate my Azure Sword. I blocked a downward swing from the blade of light, but my borrowed sword creaked alarmingly. The prince's skill in unarmed combat hadn't changed, nor had his swordsmanship—only the force of his offense had increased dramatically.

"Die!" he screamed again. "Hurry up and die! Gruesomely! Diiie!"

"No thank you," I said. "I hope to live a long life."

"Sir!" Tina shouted as her Blizzard Wolf barreled ferociously toward the prince.

Gerard retreated, clicking his tongue, and the wolf followed him. I took it that he required some time to prepare in order to block a supreme spell.

"Who do you think I aaam?!" he roared, intercepting the wolf with the blade of his sword. The area around him began to freeze as he struggled to fend off the spell. Just then, a sinister bird swooped down on him from behind—it was Lynne's Firebird.

"You're wide open," she proclaimed.

"Damn you aaall!" Gerard cried as his dagger's mana increased and shields of light materialized before and behind him, halting the spells' advance. His defenses were impressive and omnidirectional, but not powerful enough to destroy supreme spells. It ought to be safe to let them try a little.

With a shout from Ellie, a massive whirlwind—the intermediate wind spell Divine Wind Tornado, and possibly more than one—descended on the prince. Excellent teamwork.

Gerard screamed incoherently as his shields began to crumble under the three-pronged assault, but his powerful mana was undiminished. A bit of insurance wouldn't kill him, so I decided to continue. I honed the mana in my sword, augmented it with wind and lightning, and threw. My aim was true; the sword pierced the spot where Gerard's shields were thinnest and unleashed creepers of ice inside his defenses. They coiled around him, scattering mana and interfering with his control.

"Y-You coward!" the shocked prince cried with a grunt of exertion.

"Don't be ridiculous," I said. "This duel is over."

I brought down his shields, and the girls' spells tore into him from three sides. Heat, cold, and gusts of wind scattered over the arena, accompanied by a thunderous roar. Cheers and shrieks rose from the audience of students and faculty.

Two supreme spells, several intermediate spells, and an Azure Sword for good measure—some might deem that excessive force. Then again, he had used that strange dagger first; there shouldn't be an issue as long as I got him to testify to that. Wind-borne flames and shards of ice rendered visibility extremely poor, but I could sense Gerard's mana, so he wasn't dead.

"What was all that?" I said, scratching my cheek as I walked over to Tina and gave her a gentle rap on the head, eliciting a yelp in response. "I told you to retreat to safety, Tina. I see that you've become even worse-behaved than before. I could almost weep."

"B-But..." she stammered. "But I was worried about you, sir."

"And I'm grateful. That goes for you too, Ellie, Lynne."

"Y-Yessir," Ellie answered as she approached us. "I-I'm sorry." I gave her a soft rap on the head as well, prompting a cry of "That hurts!" followed by a giggle. I couldn't fathom what she was smiling for.

The red-haired young noblewoman hadn't moved from her original position and was refusing to look at me. "I will not apologize," she announced. "I'm a naughty girl who won't do as she's told."

"Oh really?" I said. "In that case, how might I convince you to mend your ways?"

"This will do," she replied after a pause, posing with both arms thrust forward, very much as a certain someone else was fond of doing.

Wh-Where did she learn that trick?! Tina, Ellie, Caren, I promise I didn't teach her that. I mean it.

"This will do!" she repeated.

I-I'm not going to do that...

Oh, honestly. I'm such a softy.

I was preparing to give Lynne her hug when blasts of dark-red light burst through the windblown fire and ice, aimed squarely at all of us! I immediately cast wind blasts around myself, knocking the nearby Tina and Ellie toward Caren while I seized Lynne's hand and pulled her behind me. I rapidly deployed spells, throwing up several stone walls in the light's path, but they were all crumbling to dust. The difference in mana was insurmountable.

"D-Dear brother!" Lynne cried as the blasts struck nearby.

"Lynne, run to Anna!" I shouted back. I was casting every defensive spell I could think of, but it seemed that diverting the blasts was the most I could do working so quickly.

His mana is an order of magnitude greater than before.

"Tina, Ellie, don't try anything either!" I shouted. "This is—"

"Leinsteeer! Howaaard!" A hateful and obsessive roar cut my warning short and left my ears ringing.

The thing that emerged from the gusts of wind, tearing through flames and smashing through ice...was no longer Gerard. He still appeared human—barely—but he was something else. Something ominous. Octagonal crystals that shone with a dark-red light covered his entire body like the scales of a dragon. His hair had changed from blond to white and crystallized partway along its length. The left half of his face was caved in and his left eye had metamorphosed into a crystal. His right hand gripped a greatsword of light magic that had grown longer than he was tall, while his left bore a massive crystal shield. His remaining right eye was focused on...

"Lynne!" I shouted as Gerard surged forward, scattering blasts of light. I cast multiple Divine Ice Mirrors to deflect them and returned fire with a barrage of elementary spells of all elements, but my attacks didn't even slow him down. I put my hands on the ground and attempted to hinder him by entangling him with enhanced Divine Earth Chains, but it proved an annoyance at best.

"Anna, call for immediate assistance!" I shouted.

"Certainly!" the head maid replied.

"Caren, take the girls and fall back to someplace safe. Lynne, hurry up and join them."

Gerard brandished his sword, mowing down my spells as I deployed them. A cloud of dust momentarily obscured my vision, but I glimpsed a shadow closing in on Lynne as she ran.

"Leinsteeer!" Gerard roared as I cast multiple physical enhancement and wind spells on my legs and instantly sprang into motion to block his advance. I cast a wind spell to fling Lynne toward the other girls without looking at her and then took evasive action myself. As I did so, I could see Gerard's lips twist into a sneer.

Oh no. A trap.

Multiple crystal spines sprouted from Gerard's body as he shifted his target to me and closed in on me like a shot, thrusting his massive sword. I couldn't dodge. I began weaving spells to at least avoid a fatal wound...and then stopped. It was a waste of mana—she was never late.

The eye of the figure bearing down on me gleamed with madness and rage. His sword was about to impale me—when both it and his shield were sliced cleanly in two, and Gerard went flying all the way into the wall with a loud crash. Hundreds of fiery plumes floated protectively around me.

"What a half-baked way of fighting..." she chided me in the same half-mocking tone she had used back then. "I know you can do better than that."

“Wh-What choice do I have?” I stammered. “I need to get him to testify before he dies.”

“Oh,” she said. “But I suppose there’s no point in holding back now.”

“That’s true,” I began to admit before the reality of the situation struck me. “Hang on! What are you doing here, Lydia?! What about the palace?!”

“My, what a stupid question.” The albatross flashed me a radiant smile as her gleaming scarlet hair fluttered in the wind. Then, she rested her favorite sword on her shoulder, winked at me, and said, “I’m at your side, and you’re at mine. What could be more natural?”

Well, I couldn’t argue with that. Despite the urgency of the situation, I burst into laughter.

“Wh-What’s so funny?” she asked.

“Nothing,” I said. “You’re right. You’re absolutely right. Sorry, and thank you. I thought I was done for.”

“You were going to die without your mistress’s permission?” she asked after a moment of silence. “You’re a failure as a servant. If you die, I’ll kill you, and don’t you forget it.”

“You’re going to kill me after I’m already dead? Now that’s a scary thought. In that case, I think I’ll keep living.”

“You’d better,” she crowed. “There are so many places I want to visit, and I’ll need you to carry my bags.” She certainly seemed to relish the idea.

Gerard—or what used to be Gerard—crawled out of the rubble, using the innumerable spines that sprouted from his legs and torso like the legs of an insect. I found it difficult to imagine that he was still conscious, and yet...

"Lydia Leinsteeer!"

An inhuman roar filled the testing ground.

He's still obsessed with her, even in this state? I can't help but pity him.

Lydia herself let out a disinterested yawn. "What is that thing, anyway?" she asked. "It doesn't look human. Why don't I just slice it up and get this over with? Do you mind if I draw True Scarlet?"

"I do mind," I replied. "I already told you."

"You never let me have any fun. I'll incinerate it, then."

Lydia instantly cast a Firebird more than twice the size of Lynne's and more powerful than those she was in the habit of firing at me. I could tell she was serious, as the spell formula was of my own devising. She launched the spell at the prince before he could regain his footing. Gerard didn't even have time to deploy his shields before the spell struck him, making a purgatory of his surroundings and even melting the walls, which had supposedly been reinforced since Lydia's and my entrance exam. I heard a scream and the loud crashes of someone writhing on the ground from within the flames.

"Is that all?" she asked. "I wish he would make more of an effort; I'm not satisfied yet." After a pause, she added, "Death is too lenient for the crime of trying to hurt my sister, my students, and my...personal servant."

Lydia looked calm at first glance, but the blazing feathers in the air were multiplying in response to her emotions. I was reminded that angering her was suicidal and made a mental note to tread carefully in future.

Gerard dragged his charred body out of the flames.

He can still move after that...?

"Now we're talking," Lydia said. "You know the drill."

"Yes, ma'am," I replied. "Just focus on slicing."

"That was always my plan!"

Lydia dashed off and I followed behind her. Dark-red light crawled out of Gerard's right hand, coating his entire body and healing his wounds. His mana was even greater than before—had he absorbed a portion of the Firebird?

Gerard's left eye swiveled eerily and emitted a ghastly light.

"Lydia!" I shouted.

"I'm not stopping!" she shouted back and picked up speed.

Unbelievable!

Gerard radiated intense bloodlust as his mana concentrated into his left eye and then fired. I rapidly cast spells. A dark-red flash shot through the air—and then reflected, tearing the clouds overhead asunder. My prediction had been spot-on; as long as I had time to prepare, I could neutralize that attack by stacking up dozens of Divine Ice Mirrors.

In the meantime, Lydia had gotten inside Gerard's guard and unleashed those perpendicular slashes she was so good at. At least three times, in fact—that was as many as my eyes could follow. Black blood spurted from all over the prince's body.

Black? Not red? Is it even altering his physical makeup? I wondered as I drew on water, lightning, and darkness to fill the prince's wounds with the best compound poison spell I could muster. Lydia followed up with another Firebird, which tore through Gerard's automated shields like paper to score a direct hit.

Gerard let out a screech of agony that hardly seemed human as he crashed into the wall a second time to be buried under flaming rubble. He was temporarily neutralized, but a dark-red glow was pulsating within the flames.

"What do you think?" I asked Lydia, who had fallen back with a look of displeasure.

"I won't have any problems slicing him up or incinerating him," she said, "but...it will be kind of a chore."

"Keeping him alive won't be easy," I agreed, "and I suspect he's immortal as long as his mana lasts."

"Thinking is your job. I just slice things."

"I have a plan," I admitted after a moment of silence, "but I'd rather not use it."

Many of the students and teachers surrounding the arena had fled, but not all of them. I might have been able to manage without an audience, but as things stood, I was at an impasse.

Hm?

"By the way, Lydia... How did you end up here?" I asked.

"That rotten elf sent me," she replied. "I bumped into him at the palace."

"Wait."

"What for?"

I focused my mind on detecting mana. Damn that headmaster. Dealing with this mess was supposed to be his job, if he could only be bothered to do it. But as twisted as he was, I knew that he cared about the academy. Would he really leave things entirely in our hands?

You know what? I'll just ask him.

I deployed the most powerful lances of magic I could manage at the most exclusive spectator seats, which commanded a view of the entire testing ground.

"D-Don't be hasty!" a startled voice responded.

"In that case," I said, "I suggest that you show your face and explain yourself!"

"Th-This is what makes you so difficult to work with. I wish you would just solve the problem and be done with it," the headmaster grumbled, looking resigned as he floated down to us in his white sorcerer's robes.

"I could say the same to you," I snapped back, keeping my tone accusatory. "Or are you about to reveal that you were a traitor all along?"

"O-Of course not," he stammered. "Wait. I'll erect a barrier."

A barrier began to cover the entire testing ground while the remaining students and faculty, and even Gerard's unconscious cronies, vanished from sight, leaving only our friends and family in the arena. The headmaster must have cast a teleportation spell as well.

"What took you so long, then?" I asked.

"I was investigating while you bought me time," he explained. "Once his transformation is complete, he'll fully merge with the spell formula, and its encryption will make study difficult. I hope you'll forgive me."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Please don't breathe a word of this," he replied reluctantly. "The spell formula embedded in that dagger is a genuine vestige of the lost great spell Radiant Shield. The Knight, who wielded the original, is a direct ancestor of the Royal House of Wainwright, and they've preserved that remnant as an heirloom. In insufficiently skilled hands, it occasionally devours its wielder's mana and transforms them into a roving monster, as you can see. I had an awful time dealing with a similar case about a century ago. He's immortal as long as his mana holds out, and vestige or not, that's a great spell—its mana is practically inexhaustible. It also consumes portions of spells to restore itself."

"How did you deal with it the last time?"

"Renowned sorcerers of the day pooled their efforts for seven days and seven nights to seal the creature," the headmaster told me. "Of course, several towns perished in the process."

"I'm sorry I asked," I said after a moment of silence.

We were running out of options. Amid the flames, Gerard thrust his right hand into empty air. His most ominous glow yet blasted the inferno away and split it into dozens of smaller fires. He then sprouted spines from his entire body as a twisted sphere materialized around him. Innumerable crystals flew through the air, circling him protectively. He seemed to be growing steadily less human.

I have a plan, but...

A third Firebird took flight. Gerard's crystals formed several shields, but Lydia's spell chewed through their resistance in mere moments. A third shriek rang out as it plunged the prince into another vision of purgatory.

He's definitely getting stronger.

Lydia looked over her shoulder and saw Tina gripping her rod. Lynne and Ellie were nearby, hand in hand, as were a battle-ready Caren and a pale-faced Lady Stella. There was no sign of Anna—she must not have made it into the barrier.

"Come here, Tiny!" Lydia commanded. "The rest of you, stay put! Rotten elf, we're going to figure something out, so keep him busy until we do!"

"You know," the headmaster responded after an affronted silence, "I'm a fairly important person. The Archmage, in case you've forgotten. But, very well. I suppose I can slow him down."

"T-Tiny?!" Tina spluttered. "How many times must I tell you my name is Tina?!"

"Just get over here!" Lydia shouted at her. "And be quick about it!"

The headmaster withdrew from our position and a fuming Tina ran up to take his place, her rod still in hand. Lydia wore a scowl as well—she was apparently less than enthusiastic.

"I assume you know what to do?" Lydia asked me.

"I'd like to avoid involving Tina, if possible," I replied after a moment.

"No," Lydia shot back immediately. "I don't want to waste any more of my time on that brainless prince. If that rotten elf can't deal with him then we'll have to do it ourselves. Tiny."

"I-I told you," Tina stammered, "my name isn't—"

"You've linked mana with my servant, haven't you?"

Tina looked startled for a moment, then rounded on me with an indignant, "Sir!"

A long pause ensued, but there was no use trying to hide it. "Forgive me," I said, prostrating myself. Unfortunately, Lydia was always one step ahead. The mere fact that I had managed to keep the events of that night from her was a remarkable achievement.

"Oh, you liar!" Tina exclaimed. Her cheeks were more puffed up with outrage than I had ever seen them before. "You said it would be our secret! I...I've had it with you!"

I didn't have an easy time of it when she found out, you know. I'm honestly amazed that I'm still alive.

"Well, that doesn't matter," Lydia continued, casually dismissing the revelation. "I'll accept it. I doubt that this is news to you, but I'm linked to him too. That's how I gained a proper command of magic—just like you, Tiny."

"What?" Tina said. "I-Is that true?!"

"Quite true," Lydia confirmed. "And that's why I'm going to ask you for a favor."

"Y-You are? Wh-What could I do for you?" Tina asked, wide-eyed.

It sounded as though Lydia was thinking the same thing I was, although that didn't make me any happier about it. After all—

All right. Fine. Don't give me that look.

"You're the only one who can do this for me," Lydia told Tina. "Will you?"

"O-Of course!" Tina energetically agreed. I welcomed her enthusiasm, but I still wished there was some alternative—not that any sprang to mind. Simply defeating Gerard wouldn't pose much of a challenge; it was ensuring his survival that would make things difficult. Lydia could fall back on True Scarlet, an enchanted sword of fire and the Leinsters' greatest treasure...but if she were to draw it and unleash the full extent of her swordplay and her Firebird, she would risk killing the prince. That said, she couldn't afford to hold back either—ill-considered attacks would only strengthen Gerard. We needed Tina's help.

"Listen," Lydia began, "I want you to link mana with Allen and cast the strongest ice spell you can manage. Don't bother going easy on that dimwit prince—he's apparently semi-immortal."

"I-Immortal?!" Tina exclaimed.

"Once that's done, leave the rest to us," Lydia continued. "Got that?"

Tina fell silent for a moment. "Sir," she said to me.

"Tina," I replied, "I'm sure this won't be pleasant for you, but —"

"I-It won't be the least bit unpleasant!" Tina cut me off. "G-Go right ahead!"

"Thank you." I gently rubbed her head and then touched the ribbon wound around her rod. I could feel our hearts grow closer together as I slowly, carefully forged the link.

Tina groaned and closed her eyes with a shudder.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

"I-I am," she said, "but it feels, um, kind of strange—like I'm floating. I was too beside myself to notice last time, but I guess this is what linking mana feels like. It's warm, and you seem so close. I like this. I like it a lot."

"Y-You don't say," I stammered.

"Once you're linked, hurry up and get ready," Lydia cut in, breaking the awkward silence as she yanked Tina and me apart. The look on her face made it plain that she was not amused.

How inconsiderate of her. She clearly minds a lot.

Tina huffed indignantly. "Sir, I'll give it my best shot!" she said.

"Take it easy," I cautioned. "You have my full support."

"Yes, sir!"

"Remember," Lydia said, "don't hold back."

"I don't need you to tell me that," Tina replied, taking a large stride forward and raising her rod as she began to prepare a spell. "I'd never go easy on someone like him!"

This is where the real battle begins. Next...

"Um, Lydia?" I said.

"What?" she snapped back.

"...Are you serious about this?"

"Of course I am," she said, holding her arms out in front of her and beckoning me with a little grunt.

“Wait,” I demurred. “I’m not mentally prepared.”

She only grunted more emphatically. It appeared I had no choice. I embraced her dainty body and stroked her hair, establishing a shallow link. She seemed happy in my arms.

“No kiss?” she protested, puckering her lips.

“That would mean too deep a link,” I told her.

“Stingy...” she grumbled. The link was established, but she made no move to step away from me. At the same time, I needed to be careful; she would demand we start over if I broke my embrace too quickly, so—

Ow! No biting my arm.

“This is the moment I’ve been waiting for,” she declared. “Now, tell me every last secret you’ve been keeping!”

“Excuse me?” I cried, startled. “D-Don’t tell me *that’s* what this is all about!”

“What else would it be about?” she shot back. “I know you’re still hiding something!” After a moment, she added, “Besides, you haven’t linked with me lately.”

I-Is now really the time for tricks?!

Tina turned to look at us and let out a cry. “S-Sir!” she exclaimed. “Get away from her! You didn’t take nearly that much time with me, and you didn’t give me a hug either! It’s unfair! It’s unjust! I demand a do-over!”

“Pipe down, Tiny,” Lydia told her. “I’m still ten thousand times stronger than you, even in this position. If this bothers you, then I suggest you surpass me—not that I’ll ever let you.”

Tina fumed wordlessly.

Really, Lydia could be so immature. That side of her hadn’t changed a bit since our first meeting four years prior. She’d only honed her swordplay and magic, gotten taller, and grown her hair out. Hang on... Why *had* she grown her hair out?

“Y-You just read m-my mind, didn’t you?!” she spluttered, blushing as red as an apple under my scrutiny. “U-Unbelievable! A-And you’ve got another thing coming if you think I took you the least bit seriously! I didn’t grow my hair out because that’s how you like it; I just happened to—”

“I hate to interrupt your little flirtation,” the headmaster cut in, “but I’m at my limit.” His mana was significantly reduced.

Thank you. You’ve done enough. And that was not *a “flirtation.”*

I stepped away from Lydia and surveyed the situation. The headmaster was holding Gerard in check with a many-layered barrier, but the prince's momentum was building.

Hm?

A tug on my right side of my coat distracted me. "Sir," Tina asked diffidently from beside me, "do you like girls with long hair?"

"Um, you're perfectly lovely already," I ventured.

"Maybe I should grow my hair out too," she mused after a drawn-out pause.

"No," Lydia cut in. "We're already at quota. Try another style."

"B-But you had short hair when you enrolled too!" Tina objected. "I saw it when I got Lynne to show me old orbs of you two the other day!"

What an unsettling conversation. What "old orbs"? Did their recordings really go back that far?

"Eyes ahead, you two," I instructed them as I calmed my nerves. "Tina."

"Y-Yes, sir!" Tina called back. "I'm fully prepared. In fact, I think this is going to go even better than it did during my final exam back home. I feel as though I could do anything."

"Lydia."

"Who do you think you're talking to?" Lydia snapped back. "Get on with it."

"Headmaster," I said, "dispel your barriers on my signal."

"Understood," the headmaster replied.

I clasped one of Tina's hands with my right and one of Lydia's with my left. Then, I closed my eyes and concentrated on refining the spells I was weaving with the two of them.

That reminds me—I don't hear that voice. I wish it would give us a demonstration of what it can do, considering that we're up against Radiant Shield, another great spell.

"Voice? What voice?" Lydia asked.

"Sir?" Tina added.

Whoops. This is only a shallow link, but I suppose they can still overhear me.

"Headmaster!" I shouted, opening my eyes.

"Right!" he called back and withdrew his barriers.

The viscous liquid that had once been Gerard surged toward us. If I had to compare it to an existing creature, I would say that it most closely resembled a slime. What I took to be its face kept its gaze fixed on Lydia in a display of incredible obsession.

"Tina!" I shouted.

"Y-Yes, sir!" Tina brandished her rod ahead of her.

And then, I heard the "voice."

"USE MY POWER IF YOU SO DESIRE. THE KEY IS IN YOUR HAND. ANNIHILATE THE IMITATION."

Tina and Lydia...appeared unaware of it. Perhaps our link was too shallow. I was pleased to find Frigid Crane so conscientious—or had it only agreed to help because we were facing one of its fellow great spells? Either way, I would have loved to meet it face-to-face.

The spell formula that I had seen at the Howard mansion took shape, overwriting Blizzard Wolf, and activated.

"Oh, how beautiful..." Tina praised the display.

"Wh-What is the meaning of this?!" the headmaster demanded, his features taut with surprise.

"Well now." Lydia narrowed her eyes.

Tina's wolf, its power greatly magnified, howled and began its charge, freezing all within its reach solid as it advanced. Gerard's outermost spines assailed it en route, but they instantly shattered and did not regenerate. Tina's spell was always powerful, but this one was a cut above.

"Howaaard!" Gerard filled the testing ground with a cry of resentment, accompanied by a bubbling sound, as a massive, sinister shield the same black as his blood formed in front of him.

Wolf and shield clashed, releasing currents of mana so potent that they were visible to the naked eye. *We might be in trouble!*

Gerard's face on the surface of the liquid mass moved violently and then assumed a fixed position as mana concentrated in his left eye. It was an order of magnitude greater than before, and it would take more than my tricks to defend against it. Lydia, who was making her own preparations beside me, moved to take a step forward, but I shot her a look that said, "Don't worry; I can do this. I'm not alone."

"Tina! Brace yourself!" I shouted, weaving a new spell even as I controlled the Blizzard Wolf.

"Go ahead!" Tina called back, tightening her grip on my right hand. "I'll be fine! Use as much of my mana as you need; I can take it!"

How reassuring.

The radiance of the jewel on Tina's rod intensified as its supply of mana rapidly increased. The area around us began to freeze over as a side effect, but I didn't feel the least bit cold.

"Alleeen!" Gerard's face roared. I was honored that he remembered my name, although I hoped that it would never pass his lips again.

His left eye set its sights on me as something dark coalesced in it and then burst forth as a beam of jet-black light. I cast the spell that I had constructed using Tina's mana, manifesting several ultra-thin Divine Ice Mirrors ahead of me, each one charged with mana orders of magnitude greater than my earlier attempts. The mirrors diffused and reflected the beam...and then turned all the resulting rays back on their source!

"Alleeen!" Gerard roared again.

I thought I asked you to stop that!

The rays struck the shield with unerring accuracy, after which the Blizzard Wolf gave another howl and finally broke through! The spell stuck Gerard's main body, spilling a gout of black blood that froze as it scattered. The prince fell still as a world of white engulfed everything around him. I did my best to contain the effects—if they spread any more, they would extend beyond the barrier. My mind and body were screaming under the strain of controlling Tina's spell and constructing Lydia's, but I ignored them.

"Lydia!" I cried.

"This is all I've got!" she shouted. "Take it with you to hell!"

An enormous Firebird manifested on the tip of her sword. It had four wings—twice the usual number. Frigid Crane must have lent its aid through me.

"FLEDGLING BIRD OF FIRE, THE KEY IS IN YOUR HAND," its voice intoned. "ANNIHILATE THE IMITATION."

"Fledgling," huh? I supposed that this must have been child's play to the great spell, even outside its preferred element. Or had its hatred of the "imitation" driven it to such lengths?

The unleashed bird of fire incinerated the entire frozen area. I poured all of my energy into controlling the spell, letting some parts burn and leaving others unscathed to bring the dagger fused with Gerard to the surface.

I've got it!

"Now for the finishing touch." I signaled to the albatross, releasing her and Tina's hands.

"I'd say so," Lydia replied with a fearless grin. I wouldn't want it any other way. She looked beautiful in fancy dresses, but it was this gallant side of her that I admired so—

Oh. I'd almost forgotten that we were still linked. My forgetfulness earned me a glare and a reproving "Sir" from my right.

"What a shame, Tiny," said a triumphant voice from my left. "It sounds like he's mine. Don't you know that the top contender always shows up late?"

"Y-You haven't won yet!" Tina fumed.

"Yes, yes. Keep telling yourself that," Lydia replied.

After a moment of silence, I ventured, "Only one—"

"I'll slice you up if you finish that sentence," Lydia said, cheerfully cutting me off.

"Th-That strikes me as rather unreasonable."

Gerard's body came into view. The flames had burned away most of his swollen bulk, restoring him to a barely human form. His right hand was fused with his dagger, and his skin was dotted with charred octagonal crystals. Fire and light struggled for dominance across his body—it looked as though his recovery couldn't keep pace with the damage.

"What's my target?" Lydia asked, readying her sword again.

"The dagger itself," I replied.

"Got it. I'll show you what the Lady of the Sword is made of. There's nothing in the world I can't slice up with you at my side!"

The sigil on Lydia's sword pulsed with light, as if in sympathy with its mistress. I set about weaving the best spell I could manage using Lydia's mana.

"O KEY, MY KEY," the voice cried with delight. "SHOW ME YOUR MIGHT."

You don't need to tell me twice, I thought as I felt a gentle squeeze on my right hand and the feelings it conveyed. *Thank you. I'll do my best. I know—why don't we do this together? I don't stand a chance on my own, but together, victory might be within our reach.*

"Now!" Lydia shouted and sped off like the wind.

Despite our predicament, Tina was strangely calm as she lifted her rod above her head. The jewel and ribbon on its tip pulsed with the magnificent light of her mana. Thousands—maybe tens of thousands—of icy blossoms materialized and then transformed into plumes of flame.

"Oh," Tina marveled, "it's gorgeous."

A Firebird had manifested above our heads. It was smaller than the previous one, but it had six wings on its back and was nearly snow white. *All this with a rod inclined toward ice?* I wondered as Tina brought her rod down and unleashed the menacing bird, which flew straight at Lydia's back.

"What?" she exclaimed. "S-Sir?!"

"There's nothing to worry about," I assured her. "Watch closely. You won't have many opportunities to see this."

The Firebird engulfed the scarlet-haired girl from behind—and then vanished, only to be drawn into her a moment later. Her sword turned deep scarlet, and six sublime wings of pale fire sprouted from her back. She beat the air with them and gained speed.

"Huh? What?!" Tina shouted, clinging to my right hand and hopping up and down. "Wh-What's going on?! What is *that*?!"

"That's the secret art of the House of Leinster: the real Scarlet Sword," I explained. "I only know two things in the world that can stop Lydia in that state. One is the previous Lady of the Sword, Duchess Lisa Leinster, and the other is the current Hero. That said, Lydia is far more impressive now than in the past."

Tina's eyes widened.

"She's going to succeed," I added.

Jet-black shields materialized in Lydia's path, their surfaces covered in faces, faces, and more faces. The amount of mana packed into them was astounding—I could believe that this thing had once leveled cities. Was this really a vestige of the great spell Radiant Shield, an heirloom of the royal family? It struck me as something more sinister.

An "imitation," is it...?

"Lydia Leinsteeer!" Gerard wailed.

"Quiet!" the albatross snapped back. "I don't belong to you, so show me some respect! I'm...I'm only for—" I couldn't catch the end of her sentence amid Gerard's piercing shrieks, but it sounded as though Lydia was as purehearted and straightforward as—

A tinge of pain caused by fingernails digging into my right arm interrupted my reflections. *Don't worry, Tina. Everyone experiences emotion differently. It's not a competition.*

Lydia's sword emitted a scarlet flash that shredded Gerard's shields and made him gush black blood from all over his body. The spurts transformed into spears in midair and assailed Lydia, but flames from her wings instantly annihilated them.

She cut him through *his shields? Her absurd feats never cease to amaze me.*

"This is the end!" With one upward flash of her blade and a dry crack, Lydia sent Gerard's right arm soaring through the air. Another flash from her sword reduced it to shreds, followed by pale fire that left only cinders. Deprived of the source of his power, Gerard began to collapse.

Lydia sheathed her sword with a high-pitched ring. Her wings vanished as she turned and began to walk toward us. I severed my links to her and Tina—I was at my limit, and trying to hide the strain had been draining in its own right.

Well done.

Lydia flashed me a smile and was about to speak when something writhed behind her. Jet-black mana coiled around Gerard and concentrated in his remaining left arm. He was poised to strike at Lydia...until he froze snow white and icicles materialized on all sides of him, sealing him in place. This time, Gerard remained completely still.

And well done to you too.

"Listen, Tiny," the willful noblewoman grumbled after a brief pause. Her hand was already on the hilt of her sword. "How about you mind your own business next time?"

"Wh-What?!" Tina exclaimed. "I saved you, and I don't even get a thank-you?! Sir, it's your fault that she behaves like this!"

"She seems the same as she always was to me," I said.

"I don't believe it. I'm sure that it's because you've spoiled her rotten!" Tina paused for a moment and then added, "I've always, *always* been able to tell what Lydia is feeling and thinking—maybe that's because we're both women. Do you realize that she never wears heels with her dresses just so that she stays shorter than you?! And she only joined the court sorcerers because you were going to! Her real goal is to be your—"

"T-Tiny!" Lydia interrupted, clapping a hand over Tina's mouth. "D-Didn't anyone teach you when you were little that it's wrong to talk about things like that?!" A moment later, she rounded on me with flushed cheeks and a piercing glare. "What? Do you have a problem with that? I-If you're looking for a fight, I'll give you one right now!"

I have no problems with anything, I thought as I laid a hand on each of their heads. *Hey, keep still. I wouldn't want your hair to get* *mussed.*

Multiple bands of light sped across the testing ground to reinforce Gerard's bonds.

Oh. It's not over yet, is it?

"Well done! You have my thanks both as the headmaster of this academy and as the Archmage." The headmaster chuckled. "You two have added a new page to the legend of your— Excuse me. May I venture a question?"

"Absolutely," I said.

"Why are you weaving dangerous spells aimed at me while the Lady of the Sword readies her weapon? The other children are giving me decidedly unfriendly looks as well."

"Well..." I began.

"Isn't that obvious?" Lydia finished.

The headmaster had been pulling the strings. I doubted that he had planned absolutely everything that had happened, and I knew that he wasn't a wicked person. Most likely, he had deliberately leaked the information that he and the reformist faculty who supported him would be absent in a plot to purge conservatives from the academy. Even my temporary teaching appointment had been bait for his trap. To those who valued status, a person of common ancestry instructing the academy's most gifted noble students was tantamount to the sky falling. Nothing would draw them out more effectively. It wasn't a bad plan—although I doubted that the headmaster had expected to catch Gerard himself in his snare—but that wouldn't be enough to excuse him.

"How could you rope my students into your games and expose the pupils under your care to danger?" I asked. "I think it's time to settle what we left unfinished four years ago. Besides which, we need to make you cough up—excuse me, *teach us* everything you know about Radiant Shield, the Knight, and a host of other topics. In fact, everything you know, period!"

"You're right. He *did* get away from us before we finished things four years ago." Lydia giggled. "Going toe to toe with this rotten elf in the place where we first teamed up doesn't sound like a bad idea at all. And just for your information, there won't be any twists like us turning out to be weaker than we used to be. Now, get ready."

"W-Wait! C-Calm down!" the headmaster pleaded. "I-I had no choice in the matter! These measures were necessary! The fate of the Royal Academy and its students—nay, of the *whole kingdom*—compelled me!”

I laughed. “That’s hardly our concern, is it? It sounds like a problem that our elders ought to have resolved quietly.”

He could be so difficult. I resolved to inform the professor about this later, which reminded me of something that had happened earlier. As I recalled, it had been, um...

“What’s that weird look for?” Lydia asked me.

“Oh, well...” I said. “Remember?”

“Huh? What do you—” Lydia suddenly paused, having realized what I was referring to. “You rotten elf. I’m going to slice you up!” She rounded on the headmaster and drew her sword.

“D-Don’t be ridiculous!” he exclaimed. “W-Would you really turn your blade on me just to cover your embarrassment?!”

“Do your best to entertain me and then die,” Lydia said sweetly as she began to pace toward the headmaster with a smile on her face. She was in deadly earnest. I wished the headmaster the best of luck—not that it would do him much good.

All right. I’ll join in and—

The rapid approach of several sets of footsteps diverted my attention. The next thing I knew, there were arms wrapped around my waist and left arm.

“A-Allen, sir, you’re...you’re not hurt, are you?!” Ellie stammered. “P-Please hold still; I’ll give you a full examination.” A moment later, she added, “I was so, so worried.”

“Dear brother, I-I’m so sorry,” Lynne joined in. “I held you back and...and put you in danger.”

“Ellie, Lynne,” I greeted them. They had only been spectators to most of the battle, but it seemed to have given them quite a shock. And why wouldn’t it have? This had probably been their first experience of mortal peril. I regretted that I hadn’t handled the situation better. Next time... No, I hoped there wouldn’t be a next time.

I looked to the stands as I comforted the two teary-eyed girls clinging to me. Lady Stella had fallen, although I doubted that she had suffered the effects of a stray spell or anything of that kind. Caren was propping her up and speaking to her.

“Stella,” Tina murmured, clutching my right sleeve. She sounded worried.

“We shouldn’t disturb her.”

"B-But..."

Tina had been the first to notice that her elder sister's condition was abnormal. Her concern demonstrated that she possessed kindness, the most precious quality a person could have. That said, the earnestly concerned girl beside me was also most likely the cause of her sister's condition, as were the maid clinging to me and the girl with curly red hair who hadn't stopped crying. The albatross—who was already in the process of cornering the headmaster single-handed—and I were probably also to blame.

Caren looked up at me.

I'm sorry I worried you. We'll talk soon.

I would have to swear her to silence about my court sorcerer exam too. I couldn't bear the thought of our parents finding out.

"Let's leave her to my sister," I told Tina, resting a hand on her head. "She's dependable, unlike me."

Tina looked nonplussed for a moment. "What?" she said. "Th-The vice president is your sister, sir?"

"Huh? Didn't I mention that?" I replied. "I know I never introduced you, but I was sure I'd said something."

"You did not!" she shouted and then began muttering to herself. "O-Oh no. I-I've let her see me in such disgraceful states... And to think that she might be my sister-in-law someday."

"Tina?" I asked. Most of her muttering had been too soft for me to hear.

"Nothing, sir!" she exclaimed, snapping back to the present.

"Dear brother," Lynne chimed in, "Miss First Place here has made some *extremely* thoughtless remarks. She ought to be ashamed of herself. I therefore suggest that you shift your hand to *my* head."

"L-Lynne, d-don't tell me you heard that!" Tina cried.

"Behave yourself, Lady Tina," Ellie interjected. "You're not hurt, Allen, sir. Would you please give me a wewa—a reward?"

"E-Ellie!" Tina shouted.

Oh dear. The danger is barely passed and they're already at it.

I smiled at the trio, but then—

The ground wobbled under my feet.

Huh? Why do I feel so weak?

"Sir?"

"Allen, sir?"

"Dear brother?"

I was just about to tell them that I was fine when Lydia glanced over at us and let out a wordless scream. A moment later, I lost consciousness.

*

I awoke to the sight of a familiar ceiling. After sitting up and looking around, I discovered that I was alone in what appeared to be a room in the Leinster mansion. Moonlight filtered in through the window.

Ugh. I feel awful.

I was lethargic, my head ached, and my mana was depleted. I supposed this was the price I paid for linking with two people at once. Still, had I only linked with Lydia, her Firebird would have killed Gerard. It nearly had even with Tina's ice to mitigate it.

Someone had left a jug of water and my pocket watch on the bedside table. I reached for them...and then thought better of it. This was miserable. I hadn't gotten it this bad since the first time I had linked mana with Lydia.

The door opened to admit the albatross in her nightgown.

"Oh," I said. "Good morning."

She didn't respond.

"Lydia?" I tried again.

More silence. She approached me without a word, seated herself in a chair at my bedside, then filled a cup with water and held it out to me.

"Th-Thank you," I stuttered.

"Hey," she eventually said, breaking her long silence.

"Yes?"

"Did you know this would happen?"

"Well..." I faltered.

"Answer me," she demanded, teary-eyed.

This won't be easy, I thought as I swallowed a mouthful of water. It was delicious.

I had foreseen this outcome, although it seemed that she hadn't picked up on that—our link had been shallow, and I had done my best to keep the consequences out of my thoughts during the battle. Lydia had more experience linking with me than anyone else, but I still brushed up against my limits every time. Even just controlling a supreme spell was strenuous and mana-intensive. And if that was the case with one partner, then the outcome with two was obvious.

The solution was surprisingly simple. I only needed to replenish my mana. In other words...I could have avoided this sorry state by taking mana from Lydia or Tina, although I had never done so and never intended to.

"Yes. I knew," I answered Lydia with a smile.

"Why did you do it, then?" she asked after a brief pause.

"It was the only way."

"It was not," she objected. "I could have just taken that idiot of a prince and—"

"Lydia. You mustn't think like that."

"You know," she resumed after a long moment, "I'm an awful person. If it comes to a choice between your life and someone else's, I'll choose yours every time."

"Thank you, but don't worry. I'll be good as new after a night's sleep. Um, Lydia?"

"There's a better way, isn't there?"

"L-Lydia?"

Her delicate fingers traced the lines of my cheek and eventually found their way to my lips. I felt a new weight on the bed. She seemed ready to cry at any moment; in fact, I believed she was crying already. She must have been worried about me—all the more so because the battle had been such a close call.

I should have told her, I thought as I wrapped my arms around her little head and hugged it to my chest.

"It's beating..." she said softly a moment later. "I can hear it."

"Yes, it is. I'm still alive."

"...Do you think you fooled me?"

"Not at all. That was our best option."

"Liar." After a pause, she added, "I'll say it as many times as it takes, Allen—I want to be your sword."

"I prefer the kind girl who plays along with my jokes and grew her hair out for me."

"I-I didn't do that for you," she stammered. "My mother just... Sorry. I guess I'm a liar too." She rubbed her head against my chest. We could both be so difficult.

The faint click of a latch intruded on my thoughts. I tapped Lydia on the shoulder and shot her a meaningful glance. Her comprehension was instantly apparent.

"So, what did I miss?" I asked, releasing my hold on her. "What happened to the headmaster?"

"I gave him a good thrashing, but he got away before I could make him talk," she replied. "That reminds me—what was that spell that Tiny cast? What did you mean about a 'voice'? My Firebird was different too. And if you're keeping any other secrets, save us both time and give them up. If you confess—"

"You'll give me a full pardon?" I ventured.

"Of course not. I suppose you might earn yourself a reduced sentence."

"I promise to tell you once things settle down," I said. "I've become keenly aware that I can't handle this alone. I'm sorry, but I'd like your help."

My frank confession caught Lydia off guard, although I couldn't understand what she found so shocking about it. "Y-You should have said so in the first place, dummy!" she stammered. "As punishment..."

"Yes, yes."

"Only one 'yes'!"

I concluded our customary exchange with another embrace. Lydia giggled and squirmed like a child in my arms as I rubbed her head.

"That tickles," she protested. Then, after a moment, she added, "Your control was perfect. That dim-witted prince is alive, and the dagger is only damaged. After all that, even his right arm partially regenerated. Can you believe it? I doubt he'll ever make a full recovery, but who cares? He deserves it! The professor and my stupid brother showed up with the royal guard right after you collapsed to arrest him—it seems like Anna let them know. He can't talk his way out of this one, and I'll make sure he doesn't. I mean, he almost brought a disaster down on the whole capital. They haven't announced his punishment yet."

So, we hadn't killed him. Thank goodness. I hadn't wanted to stain Lydia's or Tina's hands with the blood of a man like Gerard.

"You were just thinking something conceited, weren't you?" Lydia asked accusingly.

"Of course not," I said. "What about the headmaster and professor? And what happened to Caren and the girls?"

"The headmaster and professor insist that you visit them as soon as you're back on your feet," she replied. "Caren wants to speak with you too. Stella...might take some time."

"Were any of you punished at all?"

“No,” Lydia told me, “and it wouldn’t matter if we were. I’d just abandon the country.”

If they held Lydia and the girls accountable for this mess, I might consider joining her. That said, the scale of the issues at stake was overwhelming. The great spell Radiant Shield, the voice that had called it an “imitation,” that pale Firebird—the traces of great magic that I had spent the past four years vainly scouring the royal capital for had suddenly begun to reveal themselves. The headmaster had also mentioned an incident a hundred years prior; there were surely records of that. Those girls were turning out to be my lucky fairies, or maybe angels, at the rate things were—

“Hey.” Lydia interrupted my thoughts, pressing a finger to my lips. “You should know better than to think about other girls at a time like this.”

“I suppose you’re right,” I admitted. “Shall we kiss, then?”

“Yes,” she replied after a drawn-out pause.

Our faces drew together, and just as our lips were about to touch...the door burst apart with a crash. Tina, Ellie, and Lynne piled into the room, all in their nightgowns. They were so predictable.

“Stop right there, Lydia!” Tina proclaimed, pointing her rod at us. “You rigged that lottery to decide who gets to watch him in his sleep first, didn’t you?! What a disgrace to your good name as the Lady of the Sword! A-And wh-what do you think you’re d-doing?!”

“Kissing Allen,” Lydia replied.

Tina fell silent at that, but she eventually managed a simple, “Guilty.”

“I know you’ve done it too, Tiny,” Lydia said. “You can’t fool me.”

“H-H-How did you—” Tina began to stammer a question, eyes wide with surprise, only to be cut short by a hand on her right shoulder.

“Tina, we need to talk,” Lynne said with a smile.

“W-Wait,” Tina protested. “Sh-She’s trying to trick you. Yes, that’s it. D-Don’t fall for her ruse!”

“Allen, sir,” Ellie chimed in, “I-I don’t think it’s right that you’ve kissed Lady Tina and Lady Lydia, but you won’t kiss me.”

“Ellie!” Tina and Lynne rounded on the maid in shock, and the trio began to squabble. I was glad to see them so full of energy.

Hang on. If Lydia knew about that kiss, why hasn’t she taken me to *task for it? I have a* particularly *bad feeling about this...*

A handsome, tired-looking man followed the girls into the room. It looked as though he'd just returned home.

"Hi there, Allen," he said. "I see you're awake."

"Richard," I replied. "I'm sorry for putting you through all this trouble."

Lydia's weight left the bed. There was no light in her eyes.

R-Run for it, I desperately signaled to Richard. *You've got to get out of here!* But no matter how much I tried, he wouldn't take notice. It was hopeless. If he got any closer, he'd be as good as—

"Richard, you idiot," Lydia said, "what do you have to say about the mess your fool of a prince caused?"

O-Oh dear. Her bloodlust was visible to the naked eye. The esteemed vice commander of the knights of the royal guard backed away and attempted to flee, but the girls got ahead of him and blocked the door. He was completely surrounded.

"H-Hang on!" he cried. "I'll admit that we could have kept a better watch on him; no one thought he'd pull a boneheaded stunt like that the moment he got off suspension. I'm sorry, especially about what happened to you, Allen. To be honest, I can't believe you gave up on the court sorcerers over the likes of him, even if it was for your family and Lydia's—"

Richard! Don't say another word! I still haven't told Lydia and Lynne about... W-Wait. Why are they reacting like this? N-No... I-It can't be!

"You idiot," Lydia addressed Richard.

"Dear Richard..." Lynne added.

Both Leinster sisters began to weave Firebirds, while Tina and Ellie prepared spells of their own.

"What's wrong?" Richard asked. "You must have heard about that ages ago; it's the talk of the... Allen?"

"I wish I were dead..." I muttered, flopping back onto the bed and covering my face with my hands. So, Lydia's questioning had been so lax because...

I think I'll stay in bed and sulk. Yes, that sounds like a great idea. I'll awake tomorrow morning to find out this was all a dream.

"L-Lydia, Lynne, and even the Howards..." Richard said. "P-Please! Think of my lovely fiancée! H-Help!"

"No..." Lydia and Lynne began.

"Excuses!" Tina and Ellie finished.

As the room filled with Richard’s screams, I closed my eyes and drifted back into unconsciousness.

Epilogue

There are times in my life when I want to give up on everything and run. And those are often the times when running away is the last thing I could ever do. But even so, God—did you really have to go this far? It's cruel.

"Get over it and stop sulking already," one of the two people who had just entered the room told me.

"We, um, didn't mean to hide it, dear brother," the other added.

"It's fine," I replied to Lynne. "Thank you."

I was exhausted and felt hopelessly weak. I had recovered enough to move after a night of rest, but after finishing breakfast, I had settled into an armchair and embarked on an exercise in escapism. Even I had a sense of shame. I had believed that I was successfully concealing the details of my court sorcerer exam, and I could not maintain my composure in the face of the revelation that my entire social circle had known them all along.

Lydia marched up to me, seized me by the shoulders, and yanked me upright. The audacious albatross's face was right before my eyes, but I turned my head away.

"Why won't you look at me?" she demanded.

"Oh, you know..."

"Do you wish that you hadn't done it?"

"Of course not. If I had to do it over again, I wouldn't change a thing."

"Then hold your head high." She paused and then added, "It made me happy, you know."

"I can't say no to that side of you," I conceded after a longer silence. A blushing Lydia looking up at me was a force to be reckoned with; I had to marshal all of my good sense to resist the urge to hug her.

That was a close one. Now, why is she glaring at me?

There came the pitter-patter of footsteps as Tina and Ellie ran into the room. "How are you feeling, sir?" Tina asked.

"Allen, sir, I brought you some water," Ellie added.

"I'm sorry about last night, you two," I said.

"Please, don't be," Tina replied.

"You were adorable," Ellie noted with a look of confusion.

"Please don't tease me, Ellie," I told the maid after a brief pause. "But thank you."

"Y-Yessir!"

I stroked the oblivious angel's head, which prompted Tina's hair to sway with displeasure. "Sir," she protested, "you're always, *always* too soft on Ellie!"

"Jealous of your own maid, Miss First Place?" Lynne chimed in. "You're so unkind."

"You did the same thing, Lynne," Tina shot back a moment later.

"I did not," Lynne retorted.

"You did too!"

"I did not!"

"P-Please stop fighting, b-both of you!" Ellie cried.

They never stop, do they? Lydia, what are you beckoning to me for?

"Sit next to me," Lydia said.

"I don't know," I replied. "I've got a bad feeling about this."

"Just hurry up and do it!" she snapped.

"Oh, all right." After a moment, I gave in, stood up, and moved to the seat beside Lydia on the couch. "Will this do?"

Lydia didn't say a word; instead, she high-handedly forced me to lie down. I felt something warm and soft against my head. *Um...* Her warm fingers stroked my hair as I lay still, bewildered.

"Lydia," I ventured after a moment.

"What?" she asked.

"Well... This is kind of...embarrassing."

"Grin and bear it," she replied. "Isn't that what boys do?"

"You're just like Lisa, you— Ow!"

"You have some nerve, bringing up another woman," she said after a tense pause. "Do you want to be incinerated?"

"She's your mother!" I protested.

My head was resting on Lydia's lap. She had done the same for me in private before, but what had brought this on?

A chorus of shouts from my students filled the room.

"A-Allen, sir!" Ellie cried. "Th-That's indecent!"

"Dear brother and sister," Lynne added, "p-please have a sense of propriety!"

Tina merely screamed.

It looked as though peace and quiet wasn't in the cards. I exchanged looks with Lydia, and then we both laughed.

"Humph!" Tina fumed. "They're off in their own little world!"

"Oh," Ellie moaned, "that must be nice."

"Dear sister, dear sister!" Lynne cried. "I want a turn!"

"No," Lydia proclaimed with a dauntless smile. "He's mine, and you can't have him. Not that you're even a threat to me."

"What?!" Tina exclaimed.

"Wh-Why, that's...t-true," Ellie admitted grudgingly. "B-But still!"

"I-I don't think that's very kind of you," Lynne added.

Apparently, I didn't get a say in the matter. I was occupying myself by watching the trio confront their mighty foe when the door opened to admit Lisa and Anna. I righted myself as they entered.

So, Richard didn't make it. May he rest in peace.

Richard had spent the morning facing these two, Lydia, and the girls in a sparring match. Actually, it had been more of a scolding. Or perhaps torture? Still, I had suffered a miserable time; did it really matter whether his rest was peaceful?

"What a racket," Lisa remarked. "Well done, Allen. Are you feeling well?"

"Yes, thankfully," I replied. "I wish I had waited for assistance from the professor and company."

"Who could have foreseen that turn of events?" Lisa paused briefly before continuing. "I know I've said this before, but it bears repeating: the Leinsters are on your side. Don't hesitate to rely on us. You're practically a son to me, after all."

"I know," I replied after a moment. "Thank you very much."

"Spend the night here; you need rest for the time being. I suppose you must be bored. Anna, give him what we discussed."

"At once, mistress," Anna replied. "Here you are, Mr. Allen."

The head maid handed me a thick stack of bound documents. It was labeled "Potential Business Partners for the Houses of Leinster and Howard," and a red stamp on its cover read "TOP SECRET." My interest was already piqued, but I couldn't help wondering—the houses of Leinster *and* Howard? I leafed through the papers, driven primarily by my own curiosity.

Oh my. These reports cover everything from industry, sales, profits, *and number of employees to proprietors' personalities and family situations. This one is on...the Fosse Company. It's grown rapidly since a new generation of management took over a few years ago. The proprietor must know their business.*

"I'd appreciate it if you'd give those a look," Lisa jubilantly informed me. "Lynne."

"You called, dear mother?" the red-haired girl responded, hurrying over despite her apparent bewilderment.

"Do you want Allen to continue tutoring you?"

"What?"

"Answer promptly," Lisa pressed her.

"I do!" Lynne declared with feeling.

"Well said. Allen, I hope you'll continue to do your best for her. Tina, Ellie."

"Y-Yes?!" both girls answered in unison.

"Don't monopolize him," Lisa told them. "A woman should be bold. That goes for you too, Lydia."

"U-Understood!" the two younger girls chorused back.

"I don't know what you're getting at, but understood," Lydia added a moment later.

So, this was all according to Lisa's plan. She had stolen a march on me.

I'm no match for her, Lydia, so you'll just have to accept that— Hm?

"Listen," a sulky—and ever so slightly nervous—voice whispered in my ear as a curtain of glistening scarlet hair brushed my face. "I know that Lynne's hair is longer than mine used to be, but don't you dare try anything with her, or else we're going straight to the city of water. Also, when you kissed Tiny..." She hesitated a moment before continuing. "That was for a good reason, right? You didn't...fall for her or anything, right?"

It was odd how Lydia's confidence seemed to desert her at times.

"Yes, yes," I whispered back with a chuckle as I gave her a gentle hug. "Your Highness's wish is my command. Nothing like what you're imagining is going on."

"Only one 'yes'! And don't call me 'Your Highness'!" she snapped back, still in a whisper. After a brief pause, she added, "Fine, but it had really better not be!"

I kept my gaze on the sullen Lydia, and she looked away, although her dainty fingers were curled around my left sleeve. She was calming down. Our relationship hadn't changed since that day when we first met.

"Sir. Lydia," Tina interrupted my reflections.

"Allen, sir. Lady Lydia," Ellie echoed.

"Dear brother and sister," Lynne joined in.

Whoops, I thought as the trio approached us. *I almost forgot that we aren't alone.*

A year ago, I could never have imagined that things would turn out like this. I didn't know whether I would be able to remain at Lydia's side forever—I was but a humble commoner, and the girl before me was the daughter of a duke. Someday, the difference in our social standing would become insurmountable. But as long as we could be together, I wanted to keep moving forward with her. I wanted to guard her back and have her guard mine, as we had been doing for the past four years.

*

Late that night, I was feeling more my usual self and taking a stroll through the tranquil inner courtyard of the Leinster mansion. Not for any particular reason; I just felt like walking alone. Lydia was sound asleep, possibly as a result of indulging in the red wine that had been served at dinner. She looked like a goddess in her sleep—but only in her sleep.

I had stopped to touch a flower when light footfalls approached me.

"So this is where you've been, sir," Tina said. "I've been looking for you."

I turned and found her standing there in her nightgown. She and Ellie were spending the night with the Leinsters as well—out of concern for me, they said. I was glad to have such thoughtful students, but I suspected that their desire for a sleepover was also a factor. Lynne was the first friend they had made, after all. The argument between Tina and Lynne had been an amusing spectacle—their hair had given away how happy they were even as they quarreled, while a smiling Ellie looked on. How calming.

I felt cold just looking at Tina in her thin nightgown, so I draped my coat around her shoulders.

"Thank you," she said. "Don't you think the Leinsters have beautiful gardens? The plants here seem happy. The Great Tree and the others at the Royal Academy are so full of life too."

"I also enjoy them in the daylight, but a garden at night has a charm all its own," I replied. "What do you want with me at this hour?"

"Sir." Tina kept her big eyes fixed intently on me. There was a tinge of hesitation in them. After a short while, she seemed to make up her mind and continued. "It's plain to me now that I'm just not good enough—that there's so much I still lack and that I have to keep working much, much harder."

"That's not true at all," I replied, shooting her a puzzled look. "You gave a wonderful speech in front of that enormous crowd at the entrance ceremony. In your shoes, I would have been too nervous to say a word. Your magic is steadily improving as well. You've made so much progress in these past few months that I hardly recognize you. And your grades at the Royal Academy are beyond reproach. I'd be hard-pressed to find fault with you for anything. You should be proud of yourself."

"That's not what I'm talking about!" Tina shouted. "I-I mean...I'm not good enough to stand beside you now, sir! The only one who can do that"—she fixed me with the strongest glare I had ever seen from her; there was no getting out of this one—"is Lydia. You just lead me—all of us—along by the hand. She's the only one worthy to stand with you when things turn serious, isn't she? We're there to be protected; we don't have the right to help you without permission...even when you're in danger."

"Tina," I said, crouching to look her in the eye and smiling kindly as I stroked her head, "thank you for being so concerned for me, but please don't blame yourself. Lydia is the Lady of the Sword, the pride of the kingdom. I know that seeing her in action might make you anxious, but even she wasn't like that at thirteen. Don't worry. Just keep growing, step by step. That's what I'm here to help you do, remember?"

Tina's expression was still tense. She was on the verge of tears. But before long, she looked me straight in the eyes.

"I may still be a child to you, sir," she said with emphasis, "but I won't be a child forever. *Allen*! I've made up my mind that I'm going to earn a place at your side. I swear by my late mother, Rosa Howard, and the rod and ribbon that she left me that I'm going to stand by you! Be *with* you! So...so please watch me, all right? And please keep teaching me.”

I was momentarily at a loss for words. “I look forward to the day that you do,” I told her at length. “Now, let’s go back inside; you wouldn’t want to catch a cold. You have school again tomorrow, and Ellie will scold you if you can’t get out of bed in the morning.”

“Oh, you’re right!” Tina exclaimed, her eyes widening. A moment later, she asked, “Would you hold my hand and escort me back to my room?”

“I suppose I’ve got no choice,” I replied. “But only tonight. Don’t let Ellie and Lynne find out.”

“All right,” she agreed. “I won’t tell.”

“Good.” I clasped Tina’s little hand, and she finally smiled.

Ever since I had failed the court sorcerer exam, my life had been moving at a breakneck pace. I wondered why things had turned out that way, but I also didn’t mind it.

“Sir?” Her Highness asked me with a puzzled look.

“Tina,” I said, “let’s keep doing the best we can—you and me together.”

“Yes, sir!” she chirped back. “I can keep going as long as you’re with me!”

Afterword

To those of you who read the previous volume, long time no see. And to those of you who picked up this volume first, enticed by the cover, don't worry—you haven't made a mistake, although I'd appreciate it if you'd buy volume one as well. If you do that, then—wonder of wonders—volume three will come along with brand new illustrations to—

Hi, I'm Riku Nanano. I've barely gotten over how flustered I was by the release of volume one, but now I've managed to get volume two out safely as well. Thank you so much. This novel is based on my ongoing serialized story on the web novel site Kakuyomu, although I've revised about ninety percent of it. Don't worry; that still counts as revision. Really.

I had no doubts about what to include—amping up the cuteness of the new girls was my guiding principle. In the process, the headmaster et al. turned up uninvited and took over a whole chapter. They had the nerve to demand more appearances, but I successfully exterminated—I mean, *reclaimed* the material, so all's well that ends well. Honestly, who would be willing to read speeches that take up a full page or more?

Be that as it may, let's move on to Lydia. She stands out so much that she mercilessly runs off with everything—including other characters' time in the spotlight—whenever she appears. As far as Tina and the other girls are concerned, you might say that the last boss showed up early. Please look forward to their roles in future volumes.

Before I forget, I have a confession to make: when I saw drafts of the illustrations for the new characters, a devil whispered in my ear, "They sure are cute. Give them more appearances. Come on! Cut out the headmaster!"

"No," an angel pleaded to restrain me. "You'll have to rewrite another chapter if you do that! At least make it the professor!"

While the angel and devil met in single combat, Ellie took the opportunity to secure a bigger role for herself. That girl is a force to be reckoned with.

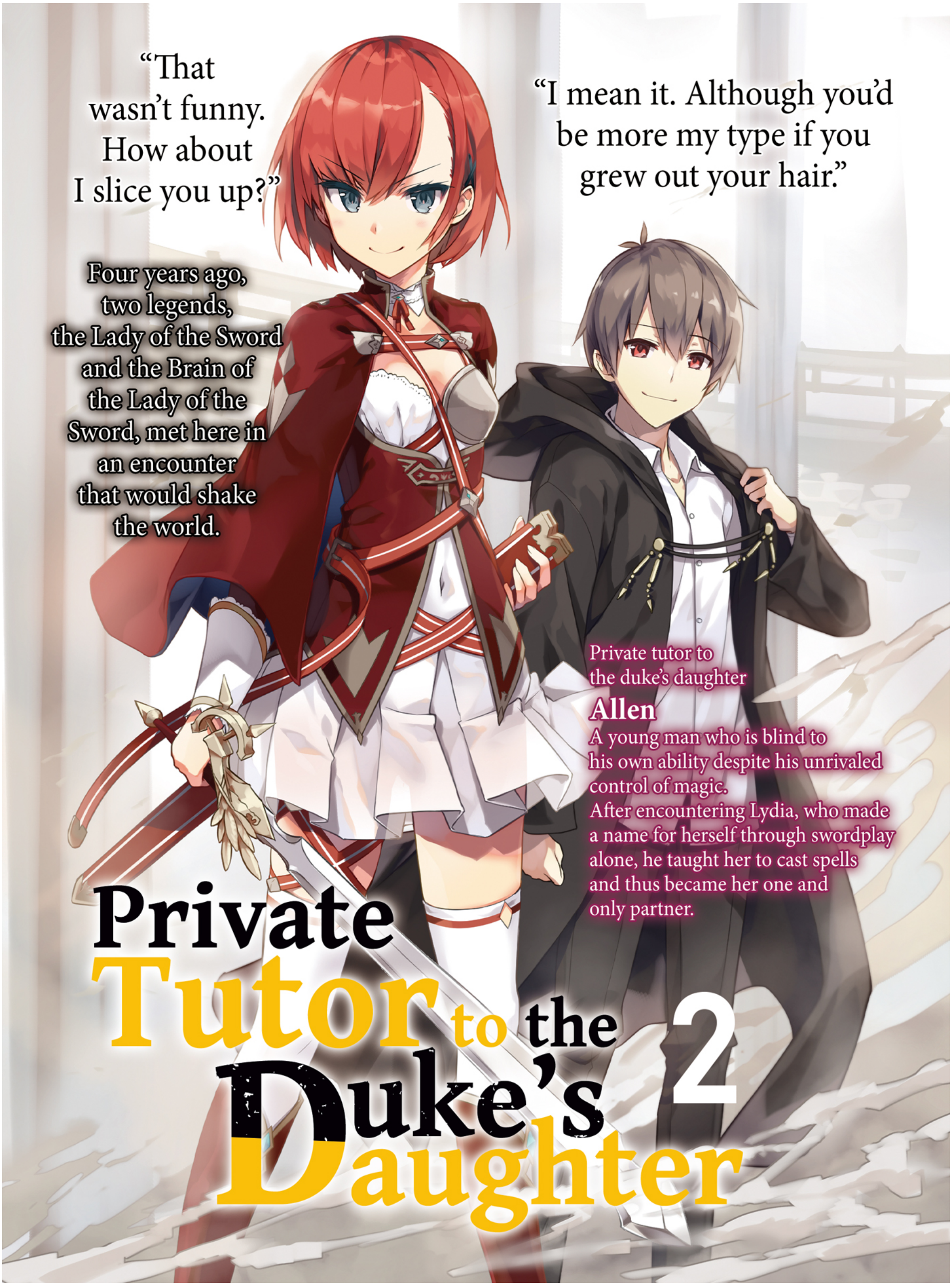
I'd like to thank all the people who helped me:

My editor. I'm in your debt again this volume. I haven't forgotten your demand for more Tina; the adults' silly ramblings are just so fun to write that— Understood. I'll be more careful going forward.

The illustrator, cura. Your drawings fill me with motivation every time I see them. Allen's handsomeness and Caren's cuteness were a one-two punch that threw me for a loop. I look forward to our continued partnership.

And all of you who have read this far. I can't thank you enough, and I look forward to our next meeting. My plan for next time is to save Stella!

Riku Nanano



"That wasn't funny. How about I slice you up?"

"I mean it. Although you'd be more my type if you grew out your hair."

Four years ago, two legends, the Lady of the Sword and the Brain of the Lady of the Sword, met here in an encounter that would shake the world.

Private tutor to the duke's daughter

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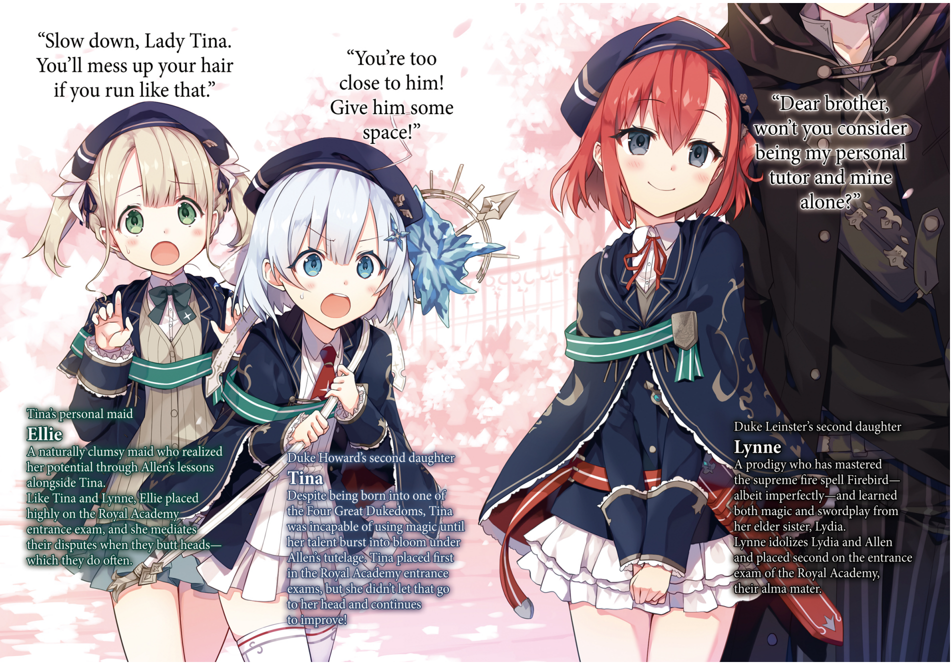
A young man who is blind to his own ability despite his unrivaled control of magic.
After encountering Lydia, who made a name for herself through swordplay alone, he taught her to cast spells and thus became her one and only partner.

Private Tutor to the Duke's Daughter 2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A naturally clumsy maid who realized her potential through Allen's lessons alongside Tina.

Like Tina and Lynne, Ellie placed highly on the Royal Academy entrance exam, and she mediates their disputes when they butt heads—which they do often.

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Tina

Despite being born into one of the Four Great Dukedoms, Tina was incapable of using magic until her talent burst into bloom under Allen's tutelage. Tina placed first in the Royal Academy entrance exams, but she didn't let that go to her head and continues to improve!

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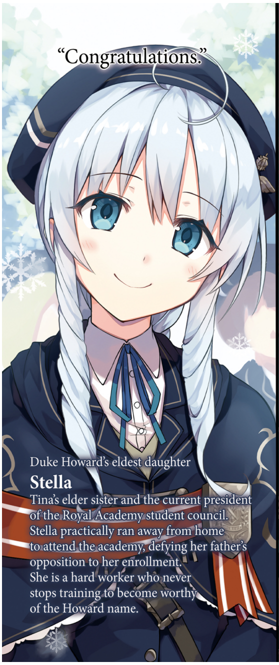
Lynne

A prodigy who has mastered the supreme fire spell Firebird—albeit imperfectly—and learned both magic and swordplay from her elder sister, Lydia.

Lynne idolizes Lydia and Allen and placed second on the entrance exam of the Royal Academy, their alma mater.



“Congratulations.”

Duke Howard’s eldest daughter

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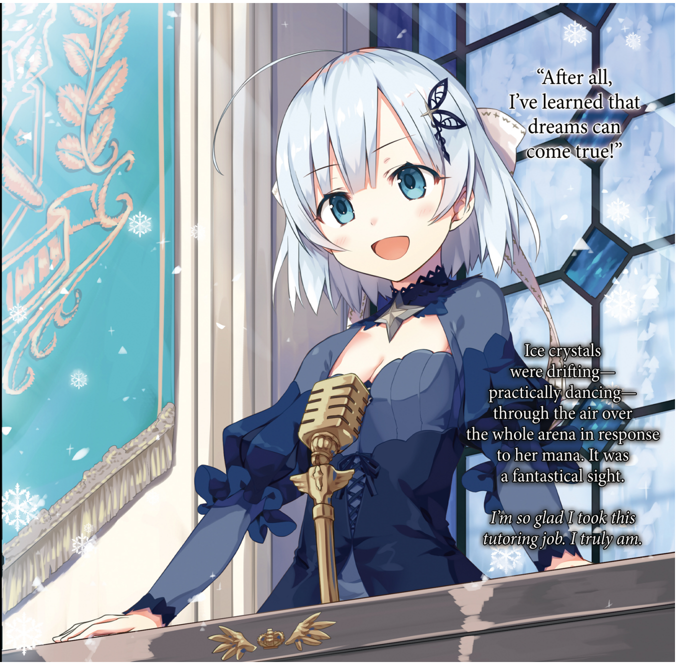
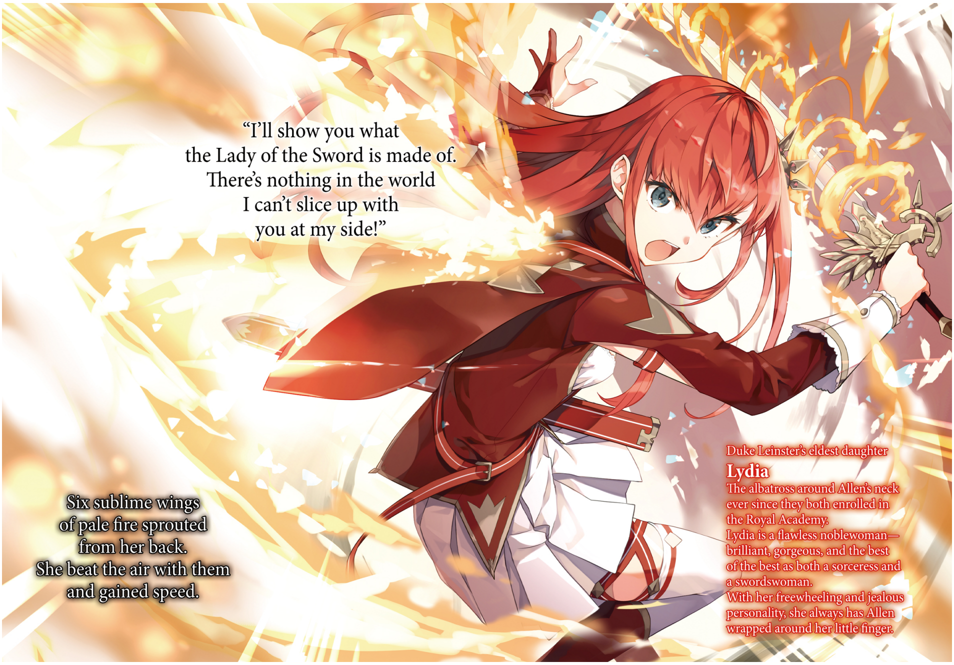
Tina’s elder sister and the current president of the Royal Academy student council. Stella practically ran away from home to attend the academy, defying her father’s opposition to her enrollment. She is a hard worker who never stops training to become worthy of the Howard name.



“After all, I’ve learned that dreams can come true!”

Ice crystals were drifting—practically dancing—through the air over the whole arena in response to her mana. It was a fantastical sight.

I’m so glad I took this tutoring job. I truly am.



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Private Tutor to the
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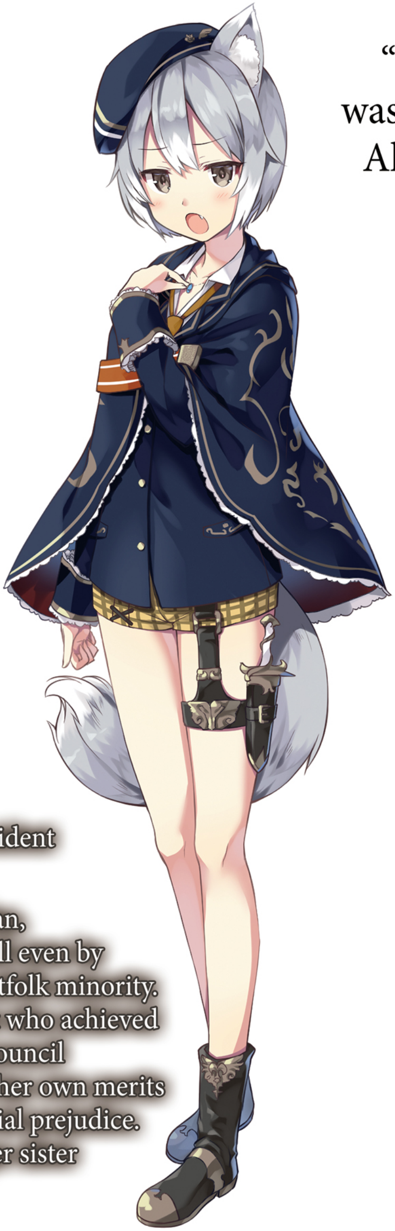

“That
wasn't fair,
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Royal Academy
student council vice president

Caren

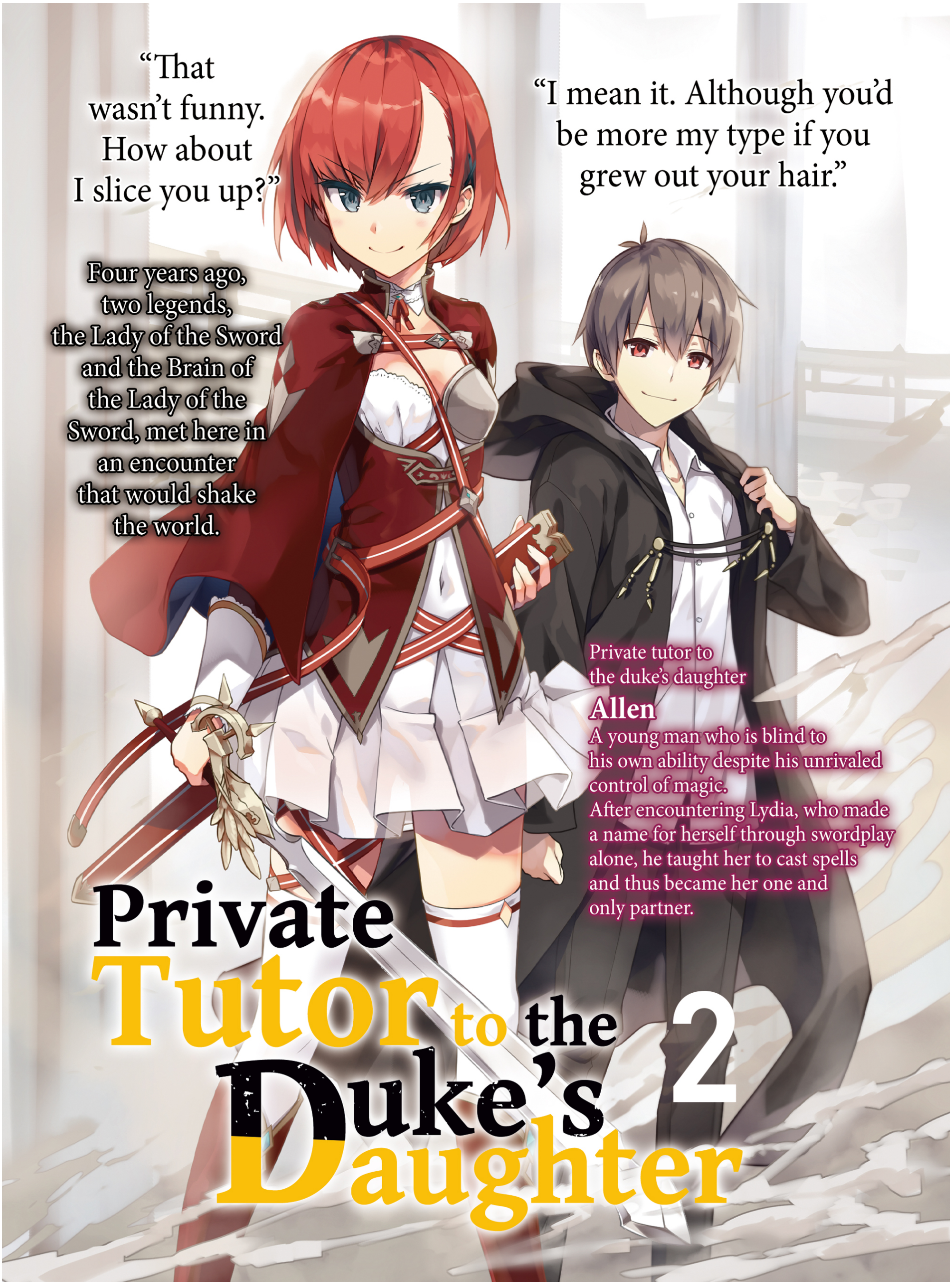
A member of the wolf clan, whose population is small even by the standards of the beastfolk minority. Caren is a model student who achieved her position as student council vice president purely on her own merits and despite lingering racial prejudice. She is also Allen's younger sister by adoption.

2

Author
Riku Nanano
Illustrator
cura

Private Tutor to the Duke's Daughter

Creating a New Legend with the Unbeatable Lady of the Sword



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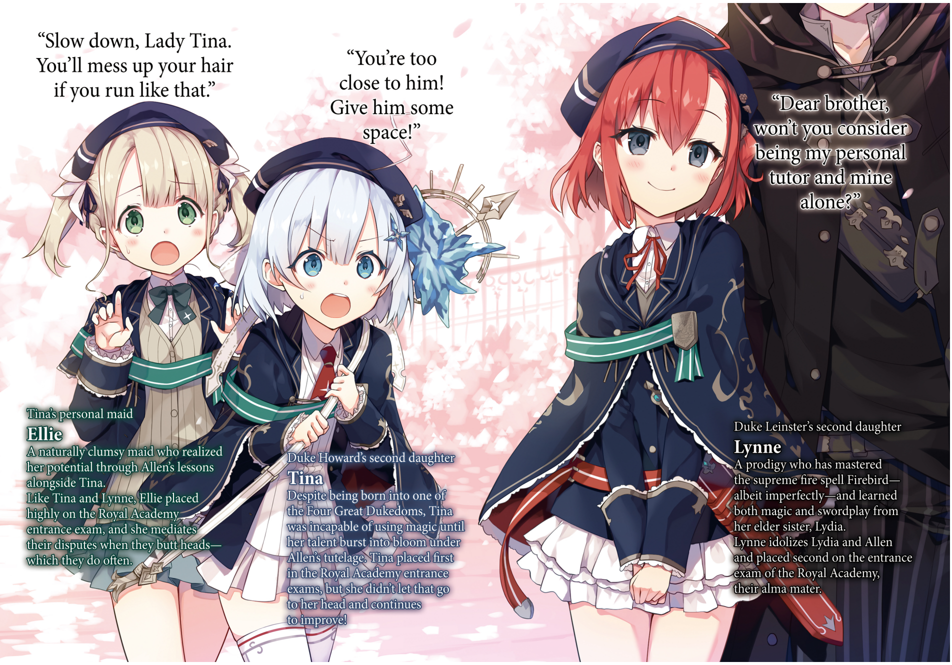
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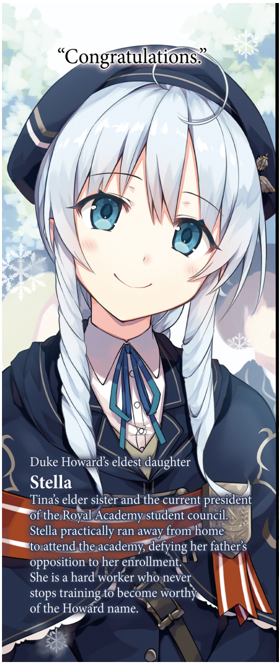
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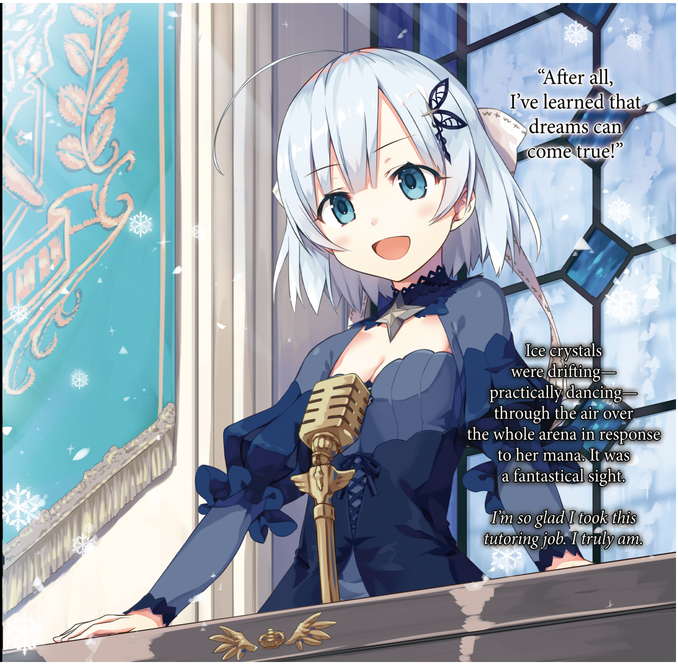
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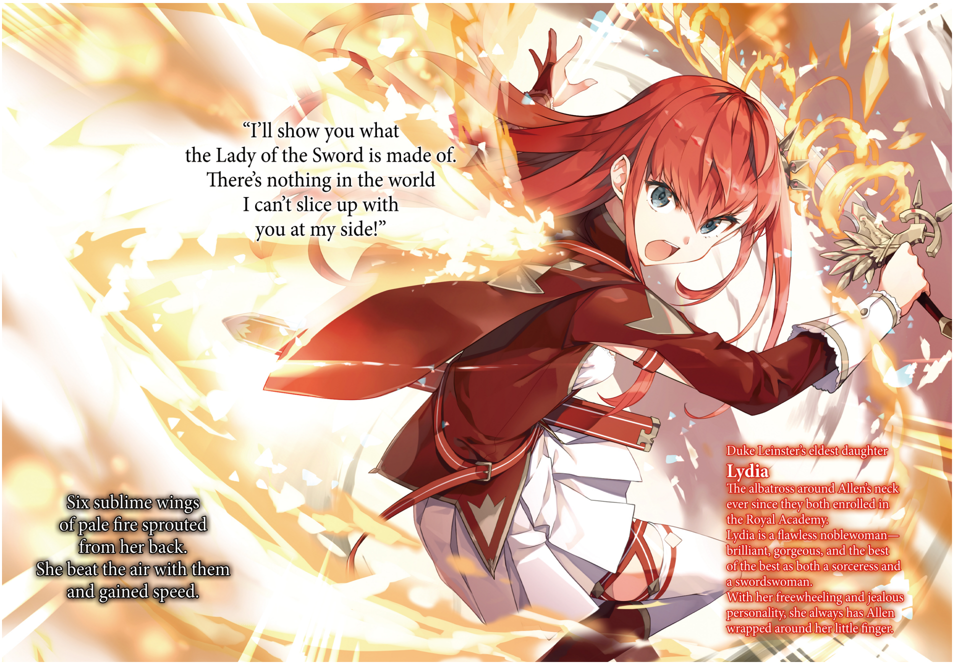

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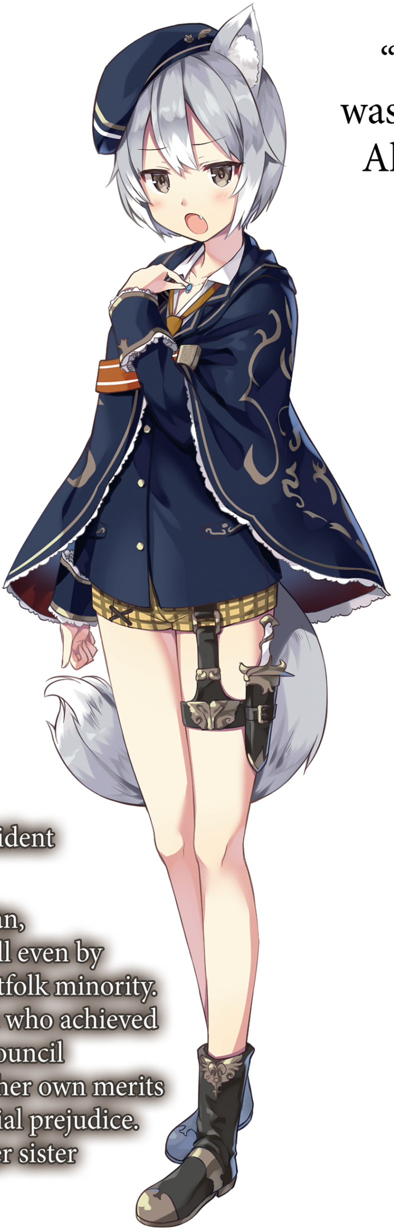

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by Riku Nanano

Translated by William Varteresian
Edited by Kieran Redgewell

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